

FOUR PLAYS

ADRIAN STEPHEN, M.C.





ADRIAN CONSETT STEPHEN

FOUR PLAYS

BY
ADRIAN CONSETT STEPHEN

Lieut. R.F.A., M.C., C. de G.

Edwards
Bartou
per E.A.B.
18/12/18



SYDNEY
W. C. PENFOLD & CO. LTD.
183 PITT STREET

1918

Copyright

FOREWORD

THIS volume contains the only evidences that are permitted to survive of the dramatic talent of Adrian Consett Stephen—the only graduate of Sydney University who has seemed born to add greatly to the literature of Australia on its dramatic side. The book is published for the members of his family and for anyone else who may wish to have it in memory of old associations or the promise of Australian youth that was part of the world's sacrifice in defence of humanity against Germanism.

The order in which the plays were composed has been disregarded so that the best may come first in the book. "Anchored" was the first written. It was the product of undergraduate days and interests, and was staged by the Sydney University Dramatic Society on July 26th, 1913, the author himself taking a part. He was then just 21. "Echoes" was performed by the Sydney Stage Society on July 1st, 1914. "Futurity" belongs to the same year, and "The Victor" is dated February 7th, 1915. In March 1915, Adrian Stephen took his degree in Law, and the rest of his

brief career was military. These plays are experiments made by a young man of 20 to 23 in a country beyond which his experience did not go, and in which the modern literary drama is not often to be seen on the stage.

On March 14th 1918, Adrian Stephen fell in action at Zillebeke, near Ypres, after two years and seven months of active service in France with the Royal Field Artillery. He had been mentioned in despatches in May 1917, and had received the Croix de Guerre (*avec palme*) for his work on the Somme in June, and the Military Cross during the Flanders offensive in October of the same year. His whole devotion was given to his military duty. He made himself a most efficient officer, and was acting Major in command of his battery for three months during some of the hottest fighting in the summer of 1917. According to latest news he had been offered a captaincy which he hesitated to accept as the offer was conditional on his leaving the battery in which he had won the love of the men, as well as the right to promotion. The official record of his last distinction speaks of his having "set a magnificent example to his men" and shown such courage under heavy shell-fire as "went a great way to enable the battery to be kept in action," while "he himself manned one of his guns and during the same action attended to and carried into safety a badly-wounded N.C.O." His private letters revealed many other evidences of his care for those whom he commanded, and of the enthusiasm and self-forgetfulness with which he used his social gifts in the cause of good comradeship. When he fell, the praise of his

senior officers told how much he had succeeded in the effort to put his whole mind and heart and soul into his work as a soldier. In that praise was his "epigrammatic wit," his being "personally beloved by every officer and man" and "the life and soul of the brigade," his seeming "to be one of those rare people with an instinct for gunnery," his excelling "because he always turned the whole powers of his extremely brilliant brain to the job in hand," his forming "a great example of the civilian becoming a great soldier." The major commanding his battery described him as "one of the most brilliant artillery officers I have ever met; it is not too much to say he was a genius."

But with that noble record, more than enough for a whole long life of one greatly gifted man, Adrian Stephen remains among Australia's "inheritors of unfulfilled renown." Those who have tried to master some Art or Science do not lightly use the word genius. It is limited by awe for the wonderful natures and the most rare manifestations of human intelligence to which alone it properly applies. He won the right to it among his peers in the profession of Arms whither no single impulse took him but response to the grim summons of Duty. How much greater right must he have had one day to the title in literature when time and means had been given for the specific talent shown in these plays to develop. That "brilliant brain" was motivated by a far greater instinct for the Drama than for gunnery; and all the powers it controlled would have found wider scope in the winning of love through the dramatic expression of those human sympathies that made the man to be cherished as much as the

officer was admired. The civilian became a great soldier by one of those acts of renunciation that are higher than the happiness of self-realization. Who shall count the loss?

The soul of Adrian Stephen was filled with passionate desire for dramatic creation. In that he must have reached his life's crown. The soundest literary judgment was anticipating this result, and it may best be recorded in the words of Professor MacCallum with whom he studied many dramatists: "None of the students I have had in forty years' experience had such an instinct for high social comedy as Adrian Stephen, and his humour and satire were always playful and kindly."

These plays may appear a little too sombre for that appreciation. But it applies even to them, and it included a great deal more fugitive writing once well known within the University. "Anchored" is very playful and kindly as an impression of the social side of college life, in spite of the dishonest action and the ungenerous character that darken the fun and are brought to shame in the end. Even the Ibsenic gloom of "Futurity" has the pervading presence of Mr. and Mrs. Gildey to lighten its morose scientific dogmatism with a warm glow of playful and kindly exhibition of the fatuous old modernist and the resolutely old-fashioned house-mother, whose instincts are refreshingly true while their interests are comic. As for "The Victor" it is but an experiment in a stage convention that wilfully tears passion to tatters under the shadow of vengeance cast by a policeman and an

ingeniously artificial arrangement of lights. It forsakes comedy for the moment. But "Echoes" is tragic only in the temporary clash of the generations that it has for motive. It is not playful, but neither is it unkindly. The contending egoisms are matched and overborne by the woman's loyalty and love that prevent them from wrecking more than her own life, which they can repair when their understanding deepens to hers, the father's more than the son's.

These plays are naturally full of echoes. A young man's work must be. "Echoes," itself, probably owed some force of suggestion to Stanley Houghton's "Younger Generation." But it is original and full of promise. Some of the dialogue is extremely vivid and telling. The situation is so well imagined and so truly felt that the words often come right, as if necessarily. In "Futurity," which is a more ambitious effort, and, on the whole, a finer one, there is less sureness of touch. But in all this little collection of plays the dramatic instinct is a living reality. Adrian Stephen spoke for himself through one of his own dramatic characters, when he said: "Whenever I speak to a man, or receive a letter, or study a law case (which is very seldom) I think to myself, now what is the frame of mind behind all this—what the motive and the cue for passion." With Hazlitt, too, he would always have felt "a sort of theoretical, as well as instinctive predilection, for the faces of play-going people as among the most sociable, gossiping, good-natured and humane members of society." For such humane men, "prone to the study of humanity," he would have poured out the riches of his mind and

heart, when experience had stored them well, playfully and in kindly satire, wittily and with sense of things unseen that are too high for laughter. But

The world, which credits what is done,
Is cold to all that might have been.

Even so, it may think warmly of what was done by Adrian Stephen on the fields of France, and regard this book as an emblem of the sacrifice that won him the unsought praise in soldiership "he was a genius," as it lost him the like renown in literature.

E. R. HOLME.

UNIVERSITY OF SYDNEY,

August, 1918.

CONTENTS

FUTURITY	..	..	..	..	..	..	1
ECHOES	..	..	..	..	..	..	64
THE VICTOR		..	..	..	..	..	99
ANCHORED	..	..	..	..	..	..	117

FUTURITY*

A PLAY OF TO-MORROW

IN TWO ACTS

CHARACTERS

REV. DAVID GILDEY

MRS. JANE GILDEY

ISABEL (a relative of the Gildeys)

DR. ALEX KING

PETERS

ACT I

SCENE [*from actors' standpoint*]: *Living-room in a country Rectory. Bay windows, LEFT; writing-desk in front of them. Fireplace, RIGHT. Farther up stage a door, and between fireplace and door a side-board. Door, BACK CENTRE. None of the chairs in the room offer great comfort, nor do the pictures merit contemplation—except one, a handsome portrait of a man over the mantelpiece.*

Time, 9 p.m.

* The Author intended to revise and make some alterations to this Play. He did not regard it as finished.

Seated before the fire is the REV. DAVID GILDEY, a perky, dapper little man, with grey hair and a kindly but wizened face. Though thoroughly conventional at heart, he is obsessed—like most conventional people, especially parsons—with the desire to be thought “original” and up-to-date. This accounts for a certain playful smartness in both his costume and his conversation.

At present he is asleep, a book on his lap, and a smouldering cheroot dangling perilously from a limp hand.

Seated near a table in the centre of the room is MRS. GILDEY, a capacious and placid old lady with large spectacles. She is knitting in such a tranquil, leisurely fashion, that it inspires one with a sense of comfort. She dresses somewhat severely, as a protest to her husband’s “smartness,” of which it is her habit to disapprove. Her remarks at times are meant to be sarcastic and crushing, but are delivered in so unstudied a tone that we realise there is no venom behind them. She is one of those people who consider it their duty to disapprove gently of everything. As her back is turned to the fireplace she does not see that David is asleep, and after shaking her head, as much as to say, “Oh, dear; oh, dear,” she voices her pet grievance.

MRS. G. Davy, dear, I insist on an answer to my questions. I have arranged them methodically into firstly and secondly, like a sermon. Now. Firstly—

Will you please take down that unpleasant picture of Isabel's father over the mantelpiece? Secondly—Isn't it high time you called in a doctor to see Isabel herself? Something is the matter with the child—nerves, headaches, and all that modern nonsense. Think before you answer. You may finish your paragraph in the book. Well, Davy? I'm glad you're considering carefully. What do you say? [*A gentle snore from Davy. She swings round and sees him.*] It's too bad—believe he did it on purpose. [*She observes the cheroot and becomes panic-stricken.*] Goodness gracious, the carpet! [*Hurriedly she snatches up an ash tray, and gingerly extracting the cheroot carries it at arm's length on the tray and flings it on the fire. Then picks up book from his lap, murmuring*] Bernard Shaw—I might have guessed it—he never can keep awake.

She wakes him.

REV. G. [*blandly*] My dear—I agree with what you said—What was it? [*He gazes round for his cheroot, mystified.*]

MRS. G. If you're looking for your cheroot it's in the fire.

REV. G. Rob a sleeping man. Cunning old cat.

MRS. G. There is really no need to use such language. That's Bernard Shaw. Well, in future you must choose between the book and the cheroot. I can't allow *both* in the sitting-room. Ash all over the carpet! No doubt, if you go into the kitchen cook will be pleased——

REV. G. To read Shaw or smoke the cheroot?

MRS. G. [*coldly*] Arn't you getting a little ridiculous, Davy? A brand new carpet, too!

REV. G. Keeps the moth out and makes the maid sweep the room.

MRS. G. Man's argument again! I mean to be firm where the carpet is concerned. Which is it to be—book or cheroot?

REV. G. Duty or pleasure? Yet, I'm not sure which is the most difficult to get through—book or cigar.

MRS. G. I should say that Duty is Duty.

REV. G. Undoubtedly. Yes, Bernard Shaw wins.

MRS. G. Duty?

REV. G. One must be up-to-date. One must interest the congregation—epigrams—paradoxes—Chesterton, and so on. To interest a congregation one must shock them. Since the arrival of the Tango that is most difficult. It is my duty to learn——

MRS. G. Learn!

REV. G. Not the Tango, my dear. But how to shock people. Hence Bernard Shaw. I mean to read all the modern novels I can lay hands on.

MRS. G. [*severely*] A most dangerous experiment for a man of your age——

REV. G. [*heated*] My dear Jane, you may know what is best for the carpet, but please allow *me* to know what is best for myself.

MRS. G. The last thing a man knows. However! Before you fell asleep reading—I mean learning how to shock people, though I think your manners are quite sufficient for that—I asked you two questions.

REV. G. [*wearily*] Why don't I take down the

picture of Isabel's father? Why don't I call a doctor to see Isabel? Same old questions!

He sits down with finality.

MRS. G. Same old answer! For sheer obstinacy give me man; especially modern man!

REV. G. I don't mean to argue.

MRS. G. There will be no argument if you do what I tell you.

REV. G. Which is——?

MRS. G. To take down that picture so that I can live in this room with comfort, without having cold shivers down the back every time I look at the horrid thing.

REV. G. Fancy, mere fancy.

MRS. G. Fancy! Just stand in that corner.

REV. G. My dear, I'm over sixty years——

MRS. G. Stand in that corner.

REV. G. [*obeying*] Ah, woman—especially old-fashioned woman!

He stands in corner down left, while Mrs. G. lifts lamp off table and holds it up to picture.

MRS. G. Now!

REV. G. Perhaps if you didn't hold the lamp directly in front—no shivers yet.

MRS. G. But the shadows. Tell me what you see.

REV. G. A rather badly-painted portrait of Isabel's father. What do *you* see?

MRS. G. There's something about it—something sin—sin——

REV. G. Sinful?

MRS. G. No, no. Sin—sin——

REV. G. Cynical?

MRS. G. Sin—sin—where's your modern reading?

REV. G. [*triumphantly*] Sinister!

MRS. G. Sinister is the word. I have noticed it in the twilight, and when the lamp throws shadows, I seem to see it smile. I believe I'll hear it break into a soft laugh next. [*Shuddering.*] Ugh! I hate it. Take it down, Davy.

REV. G. He's my cousin.

MRS. G. That doesn't give him the right to be unpleasant in our sitting-room.

REV. G. He's Isabel's father.

MRS. G. Oh, sentiment again. Aren't you too modern for that?

REV. G. [*gravely*] I let the 'moderns' into my brain, but not into my heart, my dear. It would pain Isabel if we touched the picture.

MRS. G. It's such a bad picture. She's studied Art in Paris. She must admit it's bad.

REV. G. What would it matter? The crimson threads of love and blood make it beautiful to her.

MRS. G. The crimson threads as you call them can't be very strong. He died when she was a child. The young soon forget. Besides she hardly saw him—such a wandering restless fellow—Bohemian, I think it's called.

REV. G. It's her only link with the dead.

MRS. G. The dead have no right to live with us as that picture does. [*Whimpering.*] What with the girl ill and that thing smiling all the time, I'm worrying myself miserable. I think you—you might——

REV. G. [*vanquished*] There, there old lady. I'll ask her about it. We'll remove it.

MRS. G. [*tears all gone—very practical again*] That's *firstly*. Now, *secondly*——

REV. G. Oh! A husband deserves better treatment than a congregation. Well?

MRS. G. Do you really think Isabel has been quite herself the last few months?

REV. G. She says so.

MRS. G. The point is that she's quite alone in the world, and we're in—in——

REV. G. In loco parentis?

MRS. G. Ah! the classics are ever so much more helpful than the moderns. Well, the child is in our care, and——

REV. G. She's twenty-seven, and, for that age, a most sensible girl.

MRS. G. The more sensible a girl is the less she knows about herself.

REV. G. She never talks about her health.

MRS. G. That's just why I think there is something the matter with her.

REV. G. [*tickled*] Quite an epigram, my dear. My friend Oscar Wilde and all that.

MRS. G. [*coldly*] Friend!

REV. G. Er—in the literary sense.

MRS. G. These dreadful headaches—doesn't leave her room for days at a time—locks herself in!

REV. G. Why don't you insist on seeing her?

MRS. G. Sometimes, of course, I did, but the poor child was so upset to find me worrying——

REV. G. Well?

MRS. G. I simply had to leave her.

REV. G. Why, what did she do?

MRS. G. Oh,—er—nothing.

REV. G. Say anything?

MRS. G. Er—no.

REV. G. What *did* happen?

MRS. G. She kissed me.

REV. G. Potent argument!

MRS. G. Well, why don't you go and see for yourself?

REV. G. Into her bedroom! My dear!!

MRS. G. [*thrusting*] I thought you were *modern* enough for that. [*Rev. G. is stung to the quick.*] As I said——

REV. G. Yes, yes. Brevity is the soul of wit—which reminds me of my sermon for Sunday. When Isabel comes down to write it for me I'll ask her point blank why she objects to a doctor. There now.

MRS. G. She'll kiss you.

REV. G. I'm past the age when a kiss can be regarded as a satisfactory answer.

MRS. G. Be prepared. What will you do?

REV. G. Turn the other cheek. [*Moves to desk and prepares writing materials.*] Clever sermons she writes for me, too. Such insight into the heart—such understanding sympathy with affliction. If we didn't know her through and through one might almost imagine she had some secret trouble.

MRS. G. I wonder. [*Short silence.*] Alex. will come soon. His book is nearly finished. Marriage ends a girl's troubles.

REV. G. H'm, old-fashioned view.

MRS. G. She'll need another lamp to write by. [*Rings bell, then resumes her knitting.*]

REV. G. You know if anyone can persuade her to see a doctor it's Peters.

MRS. G. Peters!—a servant!

REV. G. He's a very good fellow, is Peters.

MRS. G. A silly old man.

REV. G. Most good people are.

MRS. G. According to the moderns. She's far too familiar with him already.

REV. G. Why not? He served her father for thirty years. Knew more about him than anyone. The only person who was with him when he died.

MRS. G. What a sad, lonely death, Davy! In the wilds of Paris. I hate that Paris. Before the child went there to study art she was perfectly healthy and happy. She comes back, four years ago, as pale as a ghost and engaged to be married.

REV. G. Well, Alex's a doctor. Surely he can look after his own wife.

MRS. G. A doctor is too busy looking after other people's wives.

REV. G. [*gleefully*] Oho, you're getting very modern, my dear. Doctor's Dilemma—my friend Shaw.

Enter Peters, with lamp. He is a white-haired old butler, who seems to have grown more foolish and doddering every year from his birth. And he is now eighty. From the tangle of his thoughts one fact stands clear—his devotion to Isabel. His answers are

vague, as though he never caught the drift of a question—like a deaf person.

PETERS. Excuse the delay, sir. I guessed it was the lamp you rang for.

REV. G. Marvellous!

PETERS. Yes, sir. But you see you have rung for it every Friday night for eight years.

REV. G. Yes, life here is caught in a groove. In fact, life—according to the moderns—is—is——

MRS. G. [*still knitting*] That epigram failed.

PETERS. [*vaguely*] Yes, mum.

REV. G. *Peters, we're thinking of removing that picture——*

PETERS. [*hurriedly*] But he was a very good man, sir.

REV. G. It's not him. It's the picture. Some people——

PETERS. Don't believe them, sir. He was a very good man.

REV. G. [*puzzled*] Eh? [*But Peters makes, shuffling, for the door.*] Peters, just a minute. Tell Miss Isabel I'm all ready for her to start the sermon when she likes. By the by, about Miss Isabel——

PETERS. [*hastily*] She's quite well, sir.

Rev. G. exchanges a glance with Mrs. G.

REV. G. How did you think we thought otherwise?

PETERS. I—er—just said it.

REV. G. H'm, do you think she is quite herself?

PETERS. More so, sir.

Helpless pause on part of Rev. G.

MRS. G. [*still knitting*] Persevere, Davy.

REV. G. But these nerves—headaches—perhaps a doctor—

PETERS. That's exactly what I told——

REV. G. [*quickly*] Then you really do think——?

PETERS. [*befuddled*] No, sir, I don't really think at all.

Another set back to the Rev. G.

MRS. G. Continue!

REV. G. My good man, you've known her since a child. Do you regard her as in normal health?

PETERS. [*with unnecessary emphasis*] Really and truly, sir, she is——

ISABEL. [*happily entering at this moment*] Beautiful!

She stands in the doorway making a picture of herself, as though in playful justification of her own flattery. Justification there is ample. She is tall, supple, clad in graceful clothes. Her beauty is full of distinction and her self-possession almost regal. When she speaks it is in a surprisingly deep voice, which lends force rather than charm to her gaiety and in moments of seriousness is inclined to drop into a monotone as though it filtered from far-away and heavy thoughts—from depths beyond the ken of Rev. and Mrs. Gildey. A strange, exotic atmosphere pervades her. An orchid amidst daisies could not have a less appropriate setting than this woman in the household of a country rectory. She is too pale even for picturesqueness. Her eyes are the more striking in contrast, large, dark, heavily lidded, and veiled as with a mist of dreams, but at rare moments flashing and

glowing with a hint at untamed passions—the mark of the beast perhaps.

MRS. G. Really child!

REV. G. My dear!

ISABEL. [*laughing*] How can I be modest with Peters telling me with his eyes——?

REV. G. I'm afraid Peters——

ISABEL. Spoils me? Ah, Peters, you've a bad influence on me.

PETERS. Yes, miss.

ISABEL. That's why I like you. [*Exit Peters, satisfied.*] And I shall never be modest till Peters' eyes deny me thrice.

MRS. G. Isabel.

REV. G. Isabel.

ISABEL. I simply love shocking you, cousin Davy. Besides I'm practising for your sermons. [*Moving to desk.*] Let's get to work for next Sunday.

REV. G. Ahem! I—er—have to deliver one first.

ISABEL. To me? [*genuinely*] Oh, what have I done?

REV. G. It's what you look. You're so pale, dear.

ISABEL. [*bantering*] Like one of your modern heroines, eh, cousin Davy?

REV. G. Now, now. I don't want you to be a heroine. I do want you to be healthy.

ISABEL. [*slowly*] Yes—it must be hard to be a heroine if you're not healthy. [*Sudden change.*] But the Sunday sermon?

MRS. G. Persevere, Davy.

ISABEL. [*swooping on her gaily*] So you're behind all this lecture, are you, cousin Jane?

MRS. G. [*rising*] David insisted——

ISABEL. A regular plot! Come along, now, bold, bad conspirators. What have you got to say for yourselves?

She stands between them, an arm through each of theirs, looking from one to the other.

REV. G. Er—well, Jane?

MRS. G. Er—well, Davy?

ISABEL. [*enjoying it*] Well—both?

MRS. G. Now, David, I told you——

REV. G. [*quailing*] Alright, I'm a man of purpose.

ISABEL. [*teasing*] Blood and iron—eh, cousin Bismarck?

REV. G. We thought—we——

MRS. G. Insist——

REV. G. On your seeing a doctor.

ISABEL. [*sharply*] You haven't called one yet?

REV. G. No, not yet. But for our sake?

MRS. G. Child, be sensible. What's your answer?

ISABEL. [*kissing her*] That for one silly old thing.
[*Kissing him.*] And that for the other.

She slips away from them and runs to the window, leaving the couple face to face, gaping.

MRS. G. David!

REV. G. Jane!

ISABEL. [*from window*] Here's the express—people! Quick!

MRS. G. David, I told you——

REV. G. My dear, I'm a man——

ISABEL. [*watching train*] There she goes—you'll miss her—first time in eight years—[*They waver*]—Six carriages!

REV. G. Six!

MRS. G. Six!

The excitement is too much for them. They race to the window, and all three stand in a row watching the train, like children.

ALL TOGETHER. There—she—goes! There—she—goes!

MRS. G. All the way from the big city——

ISABEL. Twisting and turning like a live thing trying to escape from the lines men have laid—[*Turns; her eyes fall on the picture; softly*]—It must follow the path made for it——

MRS. G. She's gone!

REV. G. She's gone!

They sigh.

MRS. G. Nothing left. Just a cloud of smoke on some house. Ah, nothing ever happens here.

REV. G. No, dear—nothing.

MRS. G. That doesn't account for pale cheeks.

ISABEL. It might. Listen, cousin. It's just this waiting and worrying about Alex. He'll come by that train, some night, soon—and then, good-bye pale cheeks!

MRS. G. Why, bless the child, she's fretting for Alex. I said that marriage—And there are no secrets?

ISABEL. Really and truly, no secrets.

MRS. G. [*near to tears*] That's right. I do want you to be happy. [*Goes to door and turns.*] Remember, David—secondly—the picture! [*Exit.*]

REV. G. I'm a man. [*No sooner has she gone than he grabs a cheroot and lights it ravenously.*] When the—[*puff*]*—cat's away—the—*[*puff, puff*]*—mice will play.*

ISABEL. [*looking at him*] What does cousin Jane mean by "the picture?"

REV. G. Oh—er—h'm—did I give you the text for the sermon?

ISABEL. [*not to be put off*] Father's picture?

REV. G. Well, Jane—er—foolishly maintained—of course, fancy; mere fancy—that there was something sinister about it.

ISABEL. She noticed that.

REV. G. Did you?

ISABEL. By candlelight.

REV. G. Candle——!

ISABEL. You see, once, I—I left something in this room and came down late to fetch it—and the shadows——

REV. G. [*awed*] Made it smile softly?

ISABEL. [*parrying*] Fancy, mere fancy. [*Sits at desk.*]

REV. G. Of course. And now the sermon——

ISABEL. She wanted it removed.

REV. G. No, no, no! We knew that would pain you, dear.

ISABEL. It would *please* me.

REV. G. Oh, in that case we'll put it away.

ISABEL. No. You can't; you can't pluck those eyes out of my soul—the one pair of eyes that understand me—[*Changing*—The sermon. What's the text?

REV. G. I think perhaps—"Unto the third and fourth generation."

ISABEL. [*jerkily*] What made you think of that?

REV. G. It's modern—Alex's book on "Eugenics" suggested to me——

ISABEL. [*bitterly*] I hate that book. Four years of his working life, pottering on the Continent from University to University—four years of my waiting life pottering among my own thoughts, have been stolen by that book. Four years! If only I had them again!

REV. G. [*paternally*] And what would you do with them, eh?

ISABEL. [*almost grimly*] Live them!

REV. G. And what *did* you do?

ISABEL. [*sadly*] Watched them go by—felt them slip, cold as water through my fingers.

REV. G. [*gently*] My dear, you have made a noble sacrifice.

ISABEL. [*vehemently*] I don't believe in sacrifice!

Silence.

REV. G. Um! A little more fresh air——

ISABEL. [*with a short laugh*] I was out all the afternoon. I sat and watched the sunset. [*Leaning over back of chair, chin on hands.*] The breeze was delicious—seemed to stroke me like a soft fur. But I was sorry for the sunset.

REV. G. Sorry for the sunset!

ISABEL. [*dreamily*] It was so lonely, fading away by itself. All that beauty—nobody caring, nobody watching, nobody understanding—except one pair of eyes——

REV. G. Don't worry about the sermon. Early to bed. I'll go to Jane. Can you think of something on that text?

ISABEL. Plenty.

Exit Rev. G.

For a moment Isabel does not move. Then she writes the heading of the sermon, repeating to herself, "Unto the third and fourth generation." She picks up the paper and looks at it. Sets to work again. Pauses, and sits up. Her hand crunches a piece of blotting-paper and lets it roll upon the floor. She shrugs. Then rising, sheet of paper still in hand, she moves with quick, furtive steps to the door and listens anxiously; passes on to the window and draws the curtains, softly. Her face clears. She makes straight for the sideboard, opens it, takes out a decanter of whisky, and is about to pour some into a glass—pauses, listens—someone is coming! She replaces the decanter, goes to the fireplace and pretends to study the text in her hand.

Enter Rev. G., breathless.

REV. G. It's no use—it's no use. I'm not allowed to smoke unless encompassed by cigar trays.

ISABEL. Oh, you poor thing! Sit down here cosily before the fire. I'll work in my room.

REV. G. But the cold——

ISABEL. [*laughing*] As your Bernard Shaw would say—don't argue! I'll warn cousin Jane to come and protect her carpet.

Enter Peters.

PETERS. Shall I lock up the house, sir?

REV. G. I suppose so. It's the usual thing to do, isn't it?

ISABEL. And then light the fire in my room.

PETERS. At once, miss.

ISABEL. And Peters—[*whispers to him. His eyes instinctively turn to the sideboard*—Good-night, cousin David. Make ashes while you can, and to-morrow I'll sweep them all up for you!

REV. G. 'Night, dear. Sleep well.

Exit Isabel.

PETERS. Will you be long here, sir?

REV. G. [*smiling*] May I have ten minutes for my cheroot?

PETERS. [*serious*] Certainly, sir.

Exit Peters, glancing at sideboard. Rev. G. knocks a long ash on to the carpet, and is so filled with contrition that he goes down on hands and knees, flapping it away with his handkerchief.

MRS. G. [*entering*] Very pretty!

REV. G. [*on floor*] It is, my dear. Very pretty pattern—*very* pretty indeed.

He rises and backs on to the mat before fire.

MRS. G. [*on the war path*] You're standing on the brand new mat, David!

REV. G. [*asserting himself*] My dear old lady, I don't care how brand new the mat is. If it chooses to plant itself in the best place in the house, it must take its chance with the rest of the furniture.

MRS. G. A poor chance. Just look at that chair cover—crushed and crumpled.

REV. G. Chairs are meant to be sat on. That's where they differ from husbands. [*Pleased.*] One of my own, my dear—one of my own.

MRS. G. Another failure!

REV. G. What a blessing we manage to quarrel, isn't it?

MRS. G. [*sighing*] Nothing else ever happens.

REV. G. No—nothing.

MRS. G. Since the burglar came.

REV. G. Poor fellow; he only managed to find a box of cheroots and a pack of cards.

MRS. G. Such things from the Rectory!

REV. G. He might have taken a Bible, just for our sakes. It'll be years before we live down that burglary.

Loud knock at bay windows.

MRS. G. [*nervous*] There he is again. Those kind of people are never satisfied.

REV. G. Nonsense, Jane. [*Moves to window.*]

MRS. G. [*tearfully*] Don't, Davy. Ask him what he wants and give it to him.

REV. G. Who's there? Who? Oh, come in, come in. [*Opens window.*] It's Alex!

ALEX. Excuse the burglarious entry!

He is dressed in light overcoat, gloves, bowler hat, and has a bundle of papers under his arm. A man of twenty-nine, robust, with small moustache; he carries himself so squarely that one would hardly take him for a doctor—certainly not a scientist. "An army surgeon" is one's first thought. Full of spirits and geniality, his idea of humour is rather jovial and pointed—the attitude of a man devoted to investigation, not observation.

ALEX. I didn't want to ring and disturb old Peters. How are 'ee, Mrs. Gildey?

MRS. G. Have you had tea?

ALEX. At every station.

MRS. G. So glad you've come. And I thinking it was someone after the cheroots!

ALEX. Well, so I am!

REV. G. Bravo! A fellow conspirator! [*Hands him cheroot, which he lights.*]

MRS. G. And how is everything, Alex?

ALEX. The book is finished.

REV. G. Is that *everything*?

ALEX. Where's Isabel?

MRS. G. Upstairs. A little off colour. She's been fretting for you.

ALEX. It's been hard for her. But we'll have her well and strong before she starts life as Mrs. King. I'll take her for a tramp over the hills to-morrow. Over the hills! Gad, how good that sounds after four years over the test-tubes. Mind you, I'm out for a

holiday—on for anything, from mowing the lawn to opening bazaars.

REV. G. How did you get away?

ALEX. The book is finished. There—is—the—book!

Thumps papers on centre table.

MRS. G. A real book! What excitement!

ALEX. I want Isabel to write the final magic words, "The End." It will bring me luck.

MRS. G. David is so fond of novels.

ALEX. [*smiling*] It's hardly a novel—it's a text-book on Eugenics.

MRS. G. [*innocently*] I thought all modern novels were text-books.

REV. G. Oho, my friend Wells, and all that.

MRS. G. What's it about?

ALEX. Eugenics.

MRS. G. How nice! Supposing you lost it? What would you do?

ALEX. [*quietly*] I'd start all over again.

MRS. G. Does it mean all that to you?

ALEX. It's my religion.

MRS. G. Eugenics!

REV. G. [*learnedly*] The science of race culture.

MRS. G. David finds the new Encyclopædia so useful. We've got all the instalments down to "E" so far. [*David seeks the background.*] But is it—er, what David said—a religion?

ALEX. [*strongly*] Why not? The betterment of the human race, the health and happiness of its children——

REV. G. A religion of clay!

ALEX. Exactly. But your church spire that reaches to Heaven—is it not founded on clay? The firmer the foundation the loftier the spire. The spire is your care, sir, and your religion, which caters for the future state of the soul; the foundation is my care, and my religion, which caters for the future state of the body. Mere clay, you say! Is that a reason why we should turn our back on it, leaving it maimed, unfinished? Why should we not mould that mere clay as beautifully and grandly as we can? Help it in its blind gropings to a more perfect form, clearing obstacles, pointing dangers, laying the path to that goal which Nature has planned. Is that a bad religion?

Silence.

MRS. G. [*abruptly*] You'll stay the night, won't you?

ALEX. Thanks, rather! Where's Isabel?

MRS. G. I'll tell her.

ALEX. No, let her come down casually and see me here as comfortable as a piece of furniture.

MRS. G. Not so comfortable when David is about.

REV. G. Where are your things?

ALEX. At the station, I'm afraid.

MRS. G. Never mind, David will lend you pyjamas, and I'll make up the spare room. David will entertain you! [*Exit.*]

REV. G. This book of yours—I like keeping up-to-date—Eugenics, eh? Galton and my friend Mendel. Is that it?

ALEX. More modern.

REV. G. Excellent. And the principle of the whole thing——

ALEX. A healthier and happier race of children.

REV. G. By curing the children?

ALEX. By curing the parents.

REV. G. If you cannot?

ALEX. Prevent them from becoming parents.

REV. G. Whom?

ALEX. Science must decide. So far it has established the hereditary danger of certain diseases—Tuberculosis, Insanity, Syphilis—

REV. G. Alcoholism?

ALEX. Ah, that is a moot point. Some say it is transmissible from generation to generation—others that it is not.

REV. G. What do statistics say?

ALEX. As usual—anything that you wish them to say.

REV. G. And what do *you* say?

ALEX. I say "Yes." Investigations over four years, coupled with experiments hitherto untried, lead me unflinchingly to that conclusion. My book will lay that fact naked before the world.

REV. G. And the result?

ALEX. People in any way tainted with those diseases must be prevented from transmitting them to their children. Against them we place a new commandment—

REV. G. New commandment! Very useful for the novelists!

ALEX. "Thou shalt not marry."

REV. G. H'm, how are you going to enforce it? In theory, of course, anybody—especially the young—can do anything. In theory you can fly to the moon;

you can set your life according to the rules of science—in theory. But in practice there is always an unknown element, that crops up in the best regulated world, refusing to be measured in a test-tube—human nature. In this case it is love, deep, passionate—trite, old love. Can you curb that—with science and a new commandment?

ALEX. We can steer and direct it.

REV. G. It is God's gift.

ALEX. That is why we mustn't misuse it.

REV. G. [*warmly*] Nor tamper with it, sir. Love is sacred.

ALEX. Why?

REV. G. Doesn't sentiment answer?

ALEX. Sentiment, sentiment! The barrier that England wraps round her brain whenever a new idea comes tapping for admission! Love is sacred! Is anything sacred in itself? Is anything good or bad, wise or foolish, but on its application to hard facts, at the touchstone of reality?

REV. G. [*soothing him*] Well, well—you've got all the fire of youth—all its passions. Can you undertake to curb and steer them at the command of science?

ALEX. [*slowly*] It's got to be. What a man wills, he can achieve.

REV. G. You perhaps—you are honest with yourself. But how will you deal with those whose passions are beyond them—would you call in the Law?

ALEX. The Law is a blunderer when it touches human passion. Ultimately, no doubt, the Law will demand a clean Bill of Health before marriage——

REV. G. Bah, you make a business of love.

ALEX. It is Nature's business. But we must break that barrier of sentiment before the Law can speak. Besides, the Law can be evaded. I would appeal to a higher tribunal—the individual conscience. There is no escape from that.

REV. G. H'm, forty years as a parson have taught me that people can become wonderfully adept at escaping from it.

ALEX. [*forcefully*] From the old conscience—yes. Our science would evolve a new one. Why not? Conscience springs from faith—faith depends on facts: new facts—new conscience! We will teach people that they and their little lives are not an end in themselves. They are only an instrument working towards Nature's ends; an atom in a mosaic—one false step on their part and the mighty machine is thrown out of gear. Each one of us is a trustee of futurity. In every-day life a man may commit a breach of trust towards one, two, a dozen people without trouble from conscience. But will he do the same towards one, two, a dozen millions—endless generations? His will must bow to the world's will; his little loves and passions—what are they—in the face of the destinies of the human race? That is the birth of the Social Conscience.

REV. G. Is it stronger than love? Do you mean people to refrain from marrying and having children, simply because their Social Conscience forbids them? Can that conscience sever the crimson threads of kinship? Why, for how many people does that word "children" mean all the joy of life—perhaps the only

joy. Young man, do you realize all the mother-love that you would kill?

ALEX. [*quietly*] Do you realize all the children's suffering I would spare? You talk of "crimson threads"—crimson with the blood of hereditary victims—running like a plague from generation to generation, twisting little brains to madness, torturing tiny bodies into hideous deformities. That is your crimson thread. I tell you, sir, some of the cases that came to my notice are a nightmare to me still. I've looked on Hell—a Hell filled with little children. I've given four years of my life working to save the children of the future from being born into the same Hell—please God, I'll give the rest of it! . . . I know it is only natural to think of the parents first. You see a poor feeble-minded brat running about the street—you murmur, "poor parents—poor parents." You don't think of the child, whose health and happiness have been sacrificed to the parent's selfish passion—a passion which sentiment tries to justify because it is love!

REV. G. It was innocent—the parents never thought——

ALEX. [*bitterly*] Exactly—they never thought. Innocent perhaps—but, my God, how ignorant! Oh, this blindness of love! Science, my book there, will open its eyes.

REV. G. You ask a great sacrifice.

ALEX. [*eyes ablaze*] We play for a great stake. On the one hand the glory of the race, strength for thousands—millions of the unborn—culminating in a dream of the Superman——

REV. G. On the other hand?

ALEX. [*shrugging*] A few broken love-dreams.

REV. G. Ah, I'm not old-fashioned, but I value those love-dreams more than your theories, your philosophies, your new religion and all your science.

ALEX. [*smiling*] That's not a fair question for a scientist.

REV. G. But a scientist who is also a lover, eh—eh?

ALEX. [*laughing*] No problems. Where's Isabel?

REV. G. Why, of course! This modern conversation—very interesting. You go into the spare room—[*indicating door right*—and have a wash. I'll fetch the pyjamas. What colour—pink or green?

ALEX. A piece of both. [*Goes into spare room, pushing door to.*]

REV. G. [*chuckling*] If my wife could see you.

Realizing he may have said too much, he coughs, and hurries out. Pause. Enter Peters, cautiously. Looks round, makes for sideboard, pours out tumblerful of neat whisky and shuffles off with it. Before he reaches the door, Alex., disturbed by the footstep, comes out of spare room and intercepts him. Embarrassment of Peters, who attempts to conceal whisky.

ALEX. [*jovially*] Peters, my old friend! So yours were the stealthy footsteps?

PETERS. You, sir! Good night, Mr. Alex.

ALEX. Young as ever?

PETERS. Certainly sir. More so.

ALEX. [*seeing whisky*] H'm, so it seems—so it seems. Caught in the act, eh?

PETERS [*quavering*]. It's not for me, sir.

ALEX. Some one ill? Can I do anything?

PETERS. No, no, sir. She's quite well.

ALEX. Miss Isabel?

PETERS. Quite well, sir. Quite—er—in normal health.

ALEX. Mrs. Gildey? Why, if she were dying, all the king's horses and all the local doctors couldn't drag her to it.

PETERS. I was sent for it.

ALEX. [*chaffing*] A personal errand? Oh, how is the old blue ribboner fallen!

PETERS. It's not for me, sir.

ALEX. For cook then? Well, I trust she will recover for breakfast. Cooking, I understand, requires a clear eye and a steady hand. Besides, I always thought policemen were the special weakness of cooks.

PETERS. Cook never touches it, sir.

ALEX. The parlour-maid—shame!

PETERS. We're all blue ribboners, sir. Mrs. Gildey insists——

ALEX. But there's no one else——

PETERS. [*floundering*] I thought—I guessed perhaps someone might—I got it in case——

ALEX. In case you felt thirsty. Very laudable forethought. Let me tell you, Peters, of the devastating effect of alcohol upon the system. Now, your offspring——

PETERS. I have no intentions that way, sir.

ALEX. [*laughing*] Its' too bad of me to tease you. Come, own up. Toss it off, and be damned to subterfuge!

PETERS. I couldn't, sir.

ALEX. Couldn't! Why, "in the bright lexicon"—you know the rest.

PETERS. Certainly, sir.

ALEX. I'll join you—to show there's no ill feeling.

PETERS. I c—couldn't, sir.

ALEX. Give it to me, then. [*Takes it.*] I'll cover up the incriminating traces. [*Is about to drink, when his face becomes suddenly grave.*] Raw spirit, Peters!

PETERS. Is it, sir?

ALEX. Is it, sir? Don't you know?

PETERS. No, sir.

ALEX. Then what's the good——?

PETERS. I was told to get it, sir.

ALEX. Then there's someone who does drink it?

PETERS. It's what I'm supposed to get, sir.

ALEX. Supposed! Not the first time, eh?

PETERS. It can't be helped.

ALEX. *It* can be stopped. [*Sternly.*] It seems to me that behind all this blue-ribbon business, there's secret drinking going on. I must tell Mr. Gildey!

PETERS. Oh, sir—in his house—

ALEX. It would break his heart. You had better tell me who it is.

PETERS. [*shaking finger at picture*] It's his fault—it's his fault.

ALEX. Now, be sensible. Come now—who is it?

PETERS. Please, please, sir. You'll be sorry!

ALEX. Me! It's got nothing to do with——

Isabel's voice is heard calling "Peters! Aren't you coming?" Alex. and Peters stand gazing at one another, transfixed. "Aren't you coming?"

PETERS. [*rousing himself*] Coming, miss!

He stretches his hand to take the tumbler from Alex. The latter tries to speak, then sways slightly. The glass slips from his grip and crashes to the floor.

QUICK CURTAIN.

ACT II

Towards the end of this Act the lights are extinguished. During the momentary darkness that follows one hour is supposed to elapse.

SCENE.—*Same. Nothing has happened since the fall of the curtain, except that Peters is now on the floor picking up the broken glass, and Alex. is standing by the mantelpiece gazing at the fire with senses numbed.*

Enter Mrs. Gildey, laden with blankets, pillows, and a hot-water bottle.

MRS. G. I've brought your bedclothes, Alex. [*tilting her nose.*] Oh, what a smell of spirits—all over the carpet! What ever happened? [*No response.*] Alex!

PETERS. [*with a spasm of intelligence*] Mr. Alex. was going to have a drink when the glass slipped, mum.

ALEX. [*vaguely*] Ah, yes, I remember.

MRS. G. Well, I can't call the carpet brand new any more, that's certain. I've brought you a hot-water bottle, Alex.

ALEX. [*rousing himself*] Thanks, I—er—don't use them.

Enter Rev. G., holding something behind his back.

MRS. G. So comfy, though doctors do say they are bad for one.

REV. G. [*chipping in*] Doctors must practise what they preach, eh, Alex?

ALEX. [*dully*] Yes.

REV. G. Or they wouldn't have any "practice." Aha!

MRS. G. [*severely*] That's two attempted epigrams in one night, David. Quite enough for a man of your age—and cloth.

She sweeps into spare room, her dignity somewhat marred by the flapping of the blankets. Rev. G. watches her off, then produces gaudy pyjamas from behind his back and holds them up in triumph.

REV. G. What do you think o' them?

MRS. G. [*from spare room*] I can see them, David. They're a disgrace to the Church!

REV. G. He's not going to wear them in church, but in bed. Very different, my dear. Though both places to sleep in!

Follows, chuckling, into spare room. Enter Isabel, quietly. Alex., still staring at the fire, does not hear her. On seeing him her face lights up with surprise

and joy. *She tiptoes to him and closing his eyes with her hands, cries playfully, "Penny for Alex.'s thoughts."* Alex. swings round with a little laugh.

ALEX. I was dreaming.

ISABEL. Oh, Alex.—It's really you—how grand, grand! [*holds out her arms.*]

ALEX. [*taking her hands*] How—how are you, Isabel?

ISABEL. [*expecting a kiss*] What's the matter?

ALEX. [*moving away*] The dreams—are—still on me.

ISABEL. And the book?

ALEX. Finished.

ISABEL. At last. I've waited and waited for it, till I thought I'd go mad. But you've really and truly come. All's well that ends well.

ALEX. There's the book.

ISABEL. Not finished yet?

ALEX. Only manuscript. I wanted you to write the last words—"The End."

ISABEL. Me! What a romantic idea for scientific old Alex.! Like the wave of a handkerchief as my champion enters the lists—

ALEX. It would have been that—yes.

ISABEL. [*puzzled*] Would?

Alex. turns away. At that moment the Rev. G. bustles back, talking over his shoulder.

REV. G. My dear, you're an utter failure—utter failure. I'm just telling Jane, Alex., that with hot-water bottles and so on, she's too soft-hearted for a mother-in-law—music hall mother-in-law!

ISABEL. They're out of date.

REV. G. And they were all the vogue in my day. Out of date—say no more about them. [*Rattling on.*] Parsons themselves are going out of fashion. We should all be modern—especially in the Church. I will even go so far as to maintain that our clothes should fit us—inside and out. Why shouldn't our collars be as spotless as our souls?

MRS. G. [*entering, having made up bed. She takes in the situation, and realizes that David is very much de trop, in what she imagines to be a love scene. She tries to lure him away*] You may smoke in the other room for this once, David!

REV. G. In a minute. Again, in our methods we should be modern. How do we proceed against vice?

ISABEL. Preach at it!

REV. G. Laugh at it! Nothing can stand being laughed at!

MRS. G. [*coaxing*] There, now, you've made one epigram. Be satisfied!

REV. G. One! I feel fit for a dozen. [*He is fairly started now.*] Laugh at vice and you cure it—my friends Gilbert and Sullivan, you know. Don't write text-books, Alex.—just laugh! An example of my method may be of assistance. Take the instance of the picture-show. When it happened here last week—what do I do? Denounce it? Nonsense, nothing could fill the theatre quicker! No, I advise everyone to go, because it teaches such a salutary lesson, such a homely moral. Result—empty benches! Again, when the Tango school held its first session I urge everyone with a stout figure to attend regularly, as the

exercise is so beneficial for ungraceful persons. Result—the instructors dance among themselves! My greatest triumph, however, in the modern method, was over Sunday golf. When the men play on the links round my house on Sundays, I don't expostulate—not a bit of it! I sit on the verandah, a cheroot in one hand, a long squash in the other—and sympathetically watch them toiling in the sun. It's too much for them. Sunday golf is a thing of the past! Nothing can stand being——

MRS. G. Preached at!

REV. G. But one can't laugh at love, eh, Alex.? No one will do that here—except the picture!

ISABEL. [*hurt*] Please.

REV. G. I'll conclude with the converted book-maker——

MRS. G. [*holding door open*] David——

REV. G. [*snubbing her*] If you can't appreciate, there are others——

He looks round for support. But Alex. is gazing from the window. Isabel shows signs that the "converted bookmaker" has no interest for her.

REV. G. Ahem! [*No response. He looks round in despair.*] H'm, perhaps you're right!

He hurries out, followed by Mrs. G. The door is shut. Alex. and Isabel are alone.

ISABEL. [*joyfully*] The waiting years are over. Now we can start life again. Oh, it's gorgeous—gorgeous! When do you publish, Alex.?

ALEX. In two months.

ISABEL. Then all sorts of mysterious letters will be added to your name—perhaps a knighthood. [*With mock gravity.*] Sir Alex.! and, if you please, Lady King! Oh, it's grand and lovely, but I suppose it's silly.

ALEX. Very, I'm afraid.

ISABEL. [*startled*] What?

ALEX. [*straight out*] Isabel, I know everything.

ISABEL. [*innocently, though she guesses*] Yes, Alex.?

ALEX. Won't you help me?

ISABEL. But what is it?

ALEX. [*bracing to the unpleasantness before him*] Isabel, as I came into this room I caught Peters——

ISABEL. Yes, Alex.

ALEX. He was carrying a tumbler of spirit to someone in the house.

ISABEL. He was!

ALEX. He said he had been sent for it—often.

ISABEL. By whom?

ALEX. It seemed I had stumbled across someone secretly drinking.

ISABEL. [*steadyng herself*] Who was it?

ALEX. He didn't tell me.

ISABEL. I see.

ALEX. But—won't you help me? I heard your voice call him. It was like a blow.

ISABEL. [*her eyes flashing*] It wasn't for me. I can't imagine how you could think——!

ALEX. Wasn't? I'm sorry. I had to ask. The thought came with such shattering certainty. But that's over. Please let's forget it. [*Changing subject*]

Talking about the book, it's you who deserve to be knighted for it—not I. But for you I could never have finished it.

ISABEL. Me?

ALEX. Yes, I knew at the end of it—you were waiting for me. Amid all the horrors and unpleasantness of medical science, it was your image, beautiful and pure from such things, that beckoned me on from page to weary page.

ISABEL. [*stamping*] Alex——!

ALEX. [*surprised*] Don't you understand?

ISABEL. [*fiercely*] Don't you?

ALEX. It's mere sentiment, perhaps, but——

ISABEL. [*with a rush*] The drink was for me. I sent Peters. I taught him to lie.

ALEX. For you—Isabel!

ISABEL. Yes, yes. One of the Isabells.

ALEX. But you——

ISABEL. I lied, I know. I couldn't help it. I had to—*had* to.

She shivers and drops her forehead on to the mantelpiece. Alex. stands for a moment, and then in a wave of sympathy, moves to kiss her. She turns and checks him.

ISABEL. Not that sort of kiss, Alex.!

He pauses, not knowing how to express himself, then gently touches her arm and crosses to the window.

ISABEL. Why are you sorry for me?

ALEX. The trouble, worry—whatever it was—that you had to deaden in—this way, must have been very, very great.

ISABEL. [*steadily*] There was no trouble or sorrow.

ALEX. Some excuse I don't realize.

ISABEL. No excuses, Alex. I told myself there were—time after time—but something tore them away, one by one. I have no excuses.

ALEX. Then what, what?—The cause of it, Isabel, tell me!

ISABEL. [*looking at the picture*] You see that picture?

ALEX. Your father, yes.

ISABEL. The cause!

ALEX. His death—surely that shock has passed now?

ISABEL. His life!

ALEX. [*puzzled*] Oh!

ISABEL. You see, he went to extremes in many things. Bohemianism ran in his family. His death in Paris was caused by——

ALEX. Extremes—I see.

ISABEL. [*under her breath*] It was drink.

ALEX. But I was led to believe!——

ISABEL. So was everybody. So was I—until Peters told me the truth about him. Poor father!

ALEX. It was not till after Peters told you——

ISABEL. No.

ALEX. [*hotly*] Oh, the fool—criminal!

ISABEL. Why?

ALEX. Because that made you think you were doomed to follow in his footsteps; made you self-conscious; made you brood. That knowledge put the idea into your head till you imagined yourself a victim of heredity. It opened up a precipice before you—that otherwise you would never have dreamt of—and as you gazed at the precipice the more it fascinated you.

ISABEL. A moth circling endlessly round a lamp, but always drawing nearer and nearer—until——

ALEX. [*nodding*] That is the way exactly.

ISABEL. [*curious*] How did you know?

ALEX. It is *fact*.

ISABEL. Science. Oh, I see. Of course you would know.

She realizes that if the case had not come within his scientific knowledge, his mind would not have been subtle enough to probe such a psychological phenomenon.

ALEX. You didn't—can't have realized what it meant. If only I had guessed! Why did you shut your eyes to what was in store for you?

ISABEL. [*staring in front of her*] They were not shut. I went towards that precipice with eyes wide open. I saw what waited for me at the bottom. [*Wearily*] I tried to close my eyes—just for happiness—tried, so hard. But if I started to fool myself my thoughts would stab me. If I shut my eyes, a little imp that hid at the back of my brain would drag them open and cry: "Look where you go—have no mistake, no pretences, no illusions!" If I made excuses, it

laughed at all I did and said and felt—such a laugh! Like—like the drip—slow dripping of water in a stillness. There was only one way to stifle that mockery—only one way.

ALEX. [*slowly*] The path to the precipice.

ISABEL. Yes, yes. I knew everything I did—saw exactly where I was going. That was the torture of it—those eyes that turned inward, probing—they were open—always open—always——

ALEX. Poor Isabel! [*Trying to be hopeful.*] But a sudden weakness like this can be met, you and I together——

ISABEL. Sudden?

They look at one another.

ALEX. [*in low tones*] You don't mean——

ISABEL. [*nodding*] Eight years.

ALEX. [*whisper*] God!

Silence.

ALEX. [*desperately*] But you're not a coward, a weakling. Where was all the strength that is in you? Do you mean you didn't fight it?

ISABEL. I fought it.

ALEX. And yet?—I can't believe——

ISABEL. Listen. I am living the life of an art student at Paris. Laughter—music—a glass of wine—the gaiety of youth—nothing more. While I am there, father dies. I have to give up art and come to live with cousin David. [*Smiling.*] What a contrast—Bohemianism, then cousin Davy. I seemed to have left the sunshine and walked into a dark room. Oh,

the monotony, suffocating! Where was the laughter and the music? Then gradually I teased Peters into telling me the truth about father. That set me thinking, brooding. Something whispered to me a way to bring back the laughter and the music. The idea sneaks into my brain. I feel the longing creeping over me. I see myself lured inch by inch towards the precipice. I don't struggle. I let myself slip—slip—What is the good of struggling? I am fated. I am the victim of my father's life—it is the call of the blood, sweeping, irresistible. Then I met you, and realized all that life holds out to people, and suddenly—before I know it—I find myself on the very brink of the precipice. It is my last chance to fight. A little while—another day, perhaps—it will be too late. I decide to fight.

ALEX. [*mechanically*] You—decide—to fight.

ISABEL. I remember that night well. As I sat down to tea with cousin David and Jane, I knew that upstairs in my room was the shadow of myself I had to fight. How the evening dragged—sewing, sermons—then at last, bed-time! I went upstairs.

ALEX. You—went—upstairs.

ISABEL. What a glorious moon there was, outside!—and a silence filled with music—all the harmony of the world. Inside there was I, and that shadow with its awful passions—a hideous discord! For hours I paced up and down—my thoughts wheeling round and round the conflict till my head seemed on fire. I sobbed into my pillow, bit into it with my teeth. But I felt the power of the shadow creeping over me, and my strength slip, slipping—[*pause*—I come down—

stairs—to *it*! The candlelight falling on the picture made it—just my imagination—break into a cruel, pained smile, as though wrung from its lips by what it saw. [*Gently*]. Father had told me once how he longed to have a child of his own. If he had only known—I wonder then if——

ALEX. [*softly, bitterly*] I wonder! Crimson threads!

ISABEL. The fight was over. I went to the side-board and I knew then once for all—with a gush of relief—that the shadow had won. *It* was stronger than I.

Both are silent.

ISABEL. [*breaking the spell*] That's my story. Queer—that I should know all about it. I've studied it. My thoughts have gone back, over and over it—they had nothing else to do. [*Alex. is motionless.*] Yes, it's me—Isabel—who has done this!

Alex. walks slowly across the room and sits beside her. She watches him, almost frightened.

ALEX. [*taking her hand*] We—have—things to say.

ISABEL. [*nervous*] What is going to happen?

ALEX. Eight years, you say?

ISABEL. Yes.

ALEX. Much? I must know.

ISABEL. Night after night. Sometimes more—sometimes less.

ALEX. But always?

ISABEL. Always. Once I broke down—that was before I met you on my holiday.

ALEX. But since then—these last four years?

ISABEL. The years that were yours.

ALEX. Don't tell me!—

ISABEL. Always.

ALEX. [*bitterly hurt*] I thought perhaps—

ISABEL. I was waiting for you to give me strength.

ALEX. Yet you never told me, Isabel.

ISABEL. [*pleading*] You meant so much—you were life itself to me. I was afraid.

ALEX. And you never ceased?

ISABEL. I—I—

ALEX. [*pressing*] Did you?

ISABEL. No.

ALEX. [*with a cry*] God, how ugly it all is!

ISABEL. Ugly! That's how men judge! Ugly or beautiful!

ALEX. Perhaps it's the real morality.

ISABEL. What's—what's your verdict?

ALEX. Verdict?

ISABEL. It's a hard word, I know. Won't *you* help *me* now? It's easier than to ask—but perhaps that's only pretence—[*bracing herself.*] Do you love me, Alex., still?

ALEX. [*affectionately*] Dearest.

ISABEL. You *are* a brick, Alex.

ALEX. I knew there were depths in you—I never could fathom.

ISABEL. But when you learnt?—

ALEX. [*looking away*] It seemed—an abyss had opened.

ISABEL. What did that mean to you?

ALEX. [*turning to her*] It meant nothing to my

love. It didn't alter me towards you, one scrap. I'd be a poor sort of man if it had. You believe me, Isabel?

ISABEL. You're too grand——

ALEX. But——

ISABEL. [*frightened*] But?

ALEX. [*miserably*] We're caught in a trap.

ISABEL. Trap? What?——

ALEX. [*suddenly*] Do you know what Eugenics means?

ISABEL. Vaguely, yes.

ALEX. It means that for the sake of futurity there are some people who must not marry and have children.

ISABEL. Poor people!

ALEX. Yes. [*Wistfully.*] Way back in your heart you had dreamt of your children, hadn't you?

ISABEL. Hadn't you?

ALEX. In a rough way, yes.

Pause.

ISABEL. Well?

ALEX. [*softly*] We are two of those people.

ISABEL. [*tremulous*] We—we mustn't marry?

ALEX. No. My book brands us.

ISABEL. [*hysterically*] Oh, I can't lose you—can't! You're the only hold I have on life. I have nothing left—nothing. We must fight for that life of ours—It was to be so splendid, too. Oh, Alex.!

ALEX. [*steadily*] It's got to be.

ISABEL. [*sharply*] Because a book says so?

ALEX. Yes.

ISABEL. [*chagrined*] Oh! [*Then feverishly, as though trying to justify any action she may take.*] I told you the truth, Alex., didn't I? Every little bit of it—kept nothing back—smoothed nothing over—didn't paint it in pretty colours—it's grey—gutter-grey! Now, I've played fair, haven't I?

ALEX. Yes, it's you who is the brick.

ISABEL. The book separates us. [*Her manner changes. Coldly.*] You don't love me? You won't marry me?

ALEX. [*pained*] I can't.

ISABEL. Face the ugliness?

ALEX. I'm not a coward. Our love could face that. If it were only you and I.

ISABEL. Who else?

ALEX. Our children.

ISABEL. [*bitterly*] Who aren't alive.

ALEX. [*gently*] In our hearts they're alive. But they cannot protect themselves against what you and I choose to inflict on them.

ISABEL. [*quickly*] What's that?

ALEX. [*with a gesture*] No one can tell.

ISABEL. And no one knows.

ALEX. I know.

ISABEL. Yet you cannot tell?

ALEX. I know what science knows. It's my faith. I can't play foul with that. My book puts a brand on you and me. God, can't you see. I've caught myself in a trap? Don't make it harder!

ISABEL. Escape from it.

ALEX. We can't—not from faith, not from conscience.

ISABEL. Love is stronger than conscience.

ALEX. [*her words making an echo*] Eh?

ISABEL. No one will know.

ALEX. *We* will know. And there are others.

ISABEL. Those others!

ALEX. We should be sending the book into the world—a living lie.

ISABEL. Ah, the book! [*Her lips tighten.*] Is the book all true—fact and proof?

ALEX. No—not proof.

ISABEL. Then no harm might come to our children at all?

ALEX. No. Quite likely not. But there is just a chance.

ISABEL. Chance?

ALEX. And our guilty knowledge of it. The dice against our children are loaded—and we *know* it. What would you think of the mother who couldn't meet the eyes of her own children? Those eyes in their innocence and their trust are a judgment book where parents read their own sins. What should we read? "You gambled with our lives, our health! You gamblers—gamblers!" And at the back of the gambler's mind a doubt always hovers. Win or lose it is there. It would be a shadow over our home. Is it worth it? Is it worth it?

ISABEL. [*desperately*] Why do they—those others—come between us?

ALEX. It is eight years that come between us.

ISABEL. That's over—a nightmare. I'll be a different Isabel now.

ALEX. [*almost sternly*] Yet for the last four years, with my love to strengthen you, you were not a different Isabel.

ISABEL. That's done with.

ALEX. Nothing is ever done with. Our actions stretch further than we can see down the years. Every false step casts a burden on the future.

ISABEL. Love justifies——

ALEX. Love justifies. Yes. But not the torture of children.

ISABEL. [*her eyes flashing*] Why do they torture us then? Have *we* no rights?

ALEX. Those others——

ISABEL. [*at bay, turning on him like a fury*] Others—others—always others! Why not ourselves?

ALEX. Theirs is the higher right.

ISABEL. Theirs! They have no rights. Can ghosts of the future dictate to the living? Can unseen hands drag you away from me?—rob me of everything that is mine—mine? I stretch out my hands to you—living hands, tingling with the longing for life, and you turn to unseen hands that would rob me of that life. Thieves! I call to you with body, and mind, and soul, and you listen to the voice of shadows! I stand before you, flesh and blood, and you turn to a book—paper and ink! They have stolen four years of my life—your shadows and your book—they shan't steal the rest. [*Screaming.*] Thieves! Thieves!

She flings his book to the floor. Alex. makes no

move, no sign. He is looking away, trying—for her sake—to appear oblivious of her outraged passion. Isabel's fury, finding no opposition, spends itself emptily, passing like a gust. Reaction follows. She is swept with coldness and shame.

ISABEL. Alex.—I——

ALEX. [*gently*] It's all right, Isabel.

He picks up the book and slips it unobtrusively on to the table. This stabs through Isabel's restraint and she drops across the table, sobbing hopelessly. Pause. Alex. sits beside her and quietly grips her hand.

ALEX. Isabel—don't, please.

ISABEL. [*not looking up*] Oh! God, m-make it r-right for me to w-win!

ALEX. [*firmly*] Isabel!

ISABEL. [*slowly raising her head*] What—do—you—want?

ALEX. Can you listen? I know that what I said about those "shadows" seems cold and cruel to you. I'm going to tell you something—that may explain—something I've never told anyone. Can you listen?

ISABEL. [*hypnotised*] I—can—listen.

ALEX. [*earnestly*] Those shadows—as you call them—are not shadows to me. They are flesh and blood; they are more, they are the real gods of the world. When I started my book, it was a mere task for the brain—a scientific problem. Then gradually, as case after case was put before me, and I realized how much of the same misery I might save others, the glory of my work came to me. It stole into my heart.

I felt that I was working for thousands, millions yet to be. Their hands—unseen hands—stretched out to me, appealing. To me they were living hands. I could have cried to see their suffering—careless, needless suffering! Ignorance is its cause. *We* cannot plead that ignorance. We have suffered through the selfishness of a parent. What can we say if through the same selfishness we handed the same suffering—the same foul taint—to our own children? Where would our innocence be then? [*His voice trembling.*] Isabel—it may be folly, vanity—but I feel myself the champion of all those unborn millions. They are crying piteously for the shelter of my book; they call to me to fight their cause. And I? I would turn traitor. No, no, Isabel, the battle of the unborn millions needs strength and it needs joy. Innocence alone can give that.

Pause.

ISABEL. I see. You men have your professions—your missions—your life's work! That is why you will never understand——

ALEX. What?

ISABEL. [*from the depths of her*] Loneliness! The loneliness of God himself.

ALEX. Why not go away somewhere?

ISABEL. I have no money.

ALEX. You always have the company of the Gildeys.

ISABEL. Ha!

ALEX. [*unhappily*] Everything I say seems—somehow—cheap.

ISABEL. Oh, the Gildeys are dear old things. But

they are all details. I am all depths now. It's a bad sign when little things lose their value; they don't touch my life—dry leaves on a stream.

ALEX. [*desperately*] But your Art?

ISABEL. I've spent years on one picture.

ALEX. Why not finish it?

ISABEL. [*with a queer, little smile*] It will never be finished.

ALEX. Make that your mission!

ISABEL. You see, the picture was here. [*Touches forehead.*] I had put all my dreams into that picture. Painted all the splendour of the life that was to be ours. [*Sadly.*] It's torn and gashed now, flapping coldly——

ALEX. I, too, had a picture. [*Instinctively he looks at her.*] It's torn and gashed now.

ISABEL. [*catching his look*] Oh!

She covers her face. Silence. In the distance a faint rumble is heard.

ISABEL. [*looking up*] Do you hear that noise?

ALEX. [*moving to window*] What is it?

ISABEL. [*mechanically*] It's the ten-thirty mail. To the city. Cousin David is counting the carriages now from the dining-room window. It doesn't stop; it passes through. Nothing ever happens—except here. [*Touches forehead.*]

A whistle sounds far away. It echoes desolately.

ISABEL. [*suddenly*] I can't stand it. The years can't go on like this for ever—ever. I couldn't face them—alone.

ALEX. It's got to be.

ISABEL. [*rapidly*] Ha, I see myself that ghastly product of English morality—the spinster! Alex., come back—you're slipping away—slip——

She stops, a queer light in her eyes. A change comes over her. If Alex. saw it he would feel vaguely uncomfortable. Her speeches in the following scene are made with a purpose and without sincerity. Her emotions are artificial.

ISABEL. [*her voice caressing*] Come closer, Alex.—Sit next me. [*He sits beside her. She lays her hand on his.*] Do you remember that night, sitting here—you kissed me, crushed me to you and cried that the world did not matter?

ALEX. Memory hurts.

ISABEL. Only you and I were real then, the rest a dream.

ALEX. It's been a fine dream.

ISABEL. You swore then that nothing would come between us.

ALEX. I didn't think——

ISABEL. [*sighing*] Words, words I suppose.

ALEX. Nothing has come between us—between what is you and what is me.

ISABEL. The book?

ALEX. Who could foretell that? My manhood—my conscience is in those pages.

ISABEL. Nothing that matters!

ALEX. What!

ISABEL. [*covering her mistake*] I mean that Beauty and Love can only find an *echo* in a book—but the touch of fingers—how warm and strong a man's——

they are all details. I am all depths now. It's a bad sign when little things lose their value; they don't touch my life—dry leaves on a stream.

ALEX. [*desperately*] But your Art?

ISABEL. I've spent years on one picture.

ALEX. Why not finish it?

ISABEL. [*with a queer, little smile*] It will never be finished.

ALEX. Make that your mission!

ISABEL. You see, the picture was here. [*Touches forehead.*] I had put all my dreams into that picture. Painted all the splendour of the life that was to be ours. [*Sadly.*] It's torn and gashed now, flapping coldly——

ALEX. I, too, had a picture. [*Instinctively he looks at her.*] It's torn and gashed now.

ISABEL. [*catching his look*] Oh!

She covers her face. Silence. In the distance a faint rumble is heard.

ISABEL. [*looking up*] Do you hear that noise?

ALEX. [*moving to window*] What is it?

ISABEL. [*mechanically*] It's the ten-thirty mail. To the city. Cousin David is counting the carriages now from the dining-room window. It doesn't stop; it passes through. Nothing ever happens—except here. [*Touches forehead.*]

A whistle sounds far away. It echoes desolately.

ISABEL. [*suddenly*] I can't stand it. The years can't go on like this for ever—ever. I couldn't face them—alone.

ALEX. It's got to be.

ISABEL. [*rapidly*] Ha, I see myself that ghastly product of English morality—the spinster! Alex., come back—you're slipping away—slip——

She stops, a queer light in her eyes. A change comes over her. If Alex. saw it he would feel vaguely uncomfortable. Her speeches in the following scene are made with a purpose and without sincerity. Her emotions are artificial.

ISABEL. [*her voice caressing*] Come closer, Alex.—Sit next me. [*He sits beside her. She lays her hand on his.*] Do you remember that night, sitting here—you kissed me, crushed me to you and cried that the world did not matter?

ALEX. Memory hurts.

ISABEL. Only you and I were real then, the rest a dream.

ALEX. It's been a fine dream.

ISABEL. You swore then that nothing would come between us.

ALEX. I didn't think——

ISABEL. [*sighing*] Words, words I suppose.

ALEX. Nothing has come between us—between what is you and what is me.

ISABEL. The book?

ALEX. Who could foretell that? My manhood—my conscience is in those pages.

ISABEL. Nothing that matters!

ALEX. What!

ISABEL. [*covering her mistake*] I mean that Beauty and Love can only find an *echo* in a book—but the touch of fingers—how warm and strong a man's——

ALEX. And soft a woman's. [*He presses her hand to his lips.*]

ISABEL. [*close to him*] And the soul that speaks in the eyes and mouth——

ALEX. God!

ISABEL. Can you measure them in a test-tube—cram them into pages?

ALEX. [*entranced*] You are beautiful.

ISABEL. [*mocking*] Still?—that is the real morality.

ALEX. Everything was beautiful then.

ISABEL. Our pictures!

ALEX. Only dreams could paint them.

ISABEL. [*nestling*] Alex., we must have our picture book, mustn't we?

ALEX. [*staring at her*] Wonderful! Kiss me!

ISABEL. No, no.

ALEX. [*huskily*] Why not, Isabel?

ISABEL. That's done with.

ALEX. It's not.

ISABEL. Didn't you realize that before?

ALEX. [*quickly*] Isabel!

ISABEL. [*as though to herself*] Why not? *IT'S* our right.

ALEX. Nothing can take it from us. [*He kisses her lingeringly.*]

ISABEL. That's real. How strong you are—broad shoulders—I want you just as you are.

ALEX. And I—you.

ISABEL. Yet we would let this slip. It comes to people only once—it's ours to clutch and taste——

ALEX. Isabel! There's a strange creature looking out of your eyes.

ISABEL. [*softly*] .It is in all of us—who are flesh and blood. [*Her arms about him.*] Oh, Alex.—I do so want you.

ALEX. You beautiful thing! [*Kisses her.*] Little ear—a white elf—nestling in the woods, eh?

ISABEL. The pictures are coming back now—in a way. [*She moves.*]

ALEX. Don't go.

ISABEL. [*pathetically*] Oh, if you would only save me from myself!

ALEX. I will, dear. Tell me how.

ISABEL. If we were married—as you promised—I'd be so strong. But alone——

ALEX. Don't suggest——

ISABEL. Yes. I go on the same terrible way, year after year. And in the end——

ALEX. [*aghast*] You mustn't talk like that.

ISABEL. You sacrifice me.

ALEX. You mustn't ruin yourself—Isabel, listen——

ISABEL. You can't do anything. You're tied.

ALEX. The book?

ISABEL. Yes. If you publish, you couldn't marry me. The book brands us.

ALEX. That barrier again! Curse it!

ISABEL. When you write your next book—think of me as I will be in another of those eight years!

ALEX. [*in agony*] My God, it's horrible! Can't we do anything?

ISABEL. Not—while the book is between us.

ALEX. [*dully*] It will always be between us.

ISABEL. [*softly*] Why—always?

Their eyes meet, then turn away quickly.

ALEX. [*leaping up*] We can't do that—burn my book! We're talking wildly.

ISABEL. Is it so much—to burn a book?

ALEX. It's burning a man's faith.

ISABEL. To save me.

ALEX. There are other ways.

ISABEL. There are no other ways.

ALEX. [*taking up book tenderly*] Poor old book—I couldn't.

ISABEL. [*wounding him*] You kiss me—then hand me over to the very forces you are fighting.

ALEX. [*coming back to her*] Isabel, you know——

ISABEL. I'm sorry. [*She leans over sofa towards him.*]

ALEX. What makes you so beautiful to-night?

ISABEL. [*cruelly*] My beauty won't last long—unless——

ALEX. That's morbid.

ISABEL. We must face the facts.

ALEX. [*wildly*] Yes, yes, yes. We must face the facts. How do we stand? If the book is burned—all its case is lost.

ISABEL. The book is not all fact and proof——

ALEX. True, true. It may be a huge mistake, eh? Aha! There's madness in that thought.

ISABEL. So you see—the loss after all——

ALEX. If it's true—what happens to “those others”?——

ISABEL. Someone else can take up the work.

ALEX. Someone else—ah, yes—I'm not the only one—a fool's vanity to think so.

ISABEL. Why should *you* shoulder this burden?

ALEX. It's my duty.

ISABEL. Duty lies nearer.

ALEX. But my conscience?—

ISABEL. [*bitterly*] Does your conscience let you stand by and see me—

ALEX. My God, no! I'd be a murderer.

ISABEL. There's madness in that thought, too.

ALEX. [*distraught*] Is there no firm ground for us?

ISABEL. Why go so far? [*He looks at her.*] Reality is in ourselves.

ALEX. [*sitting next to her, wearied out*] You're right. We—you and I—are the only realities. The rest are less than shadows now. I was blind. I did not know the value and the beauty of the living.

ISABEL. They are the true gods.

ALEX. Our own natures, yes. Something that sweeps us beyond right or wrong—that calls to us. We must obey. Our lives must have their way with us. It's got to be.

ISABEL. I'll have you always. Won't I? Won't I?

ALEX. Nothing separates us now.

ISABEL. And we'll burn what tried to.

ALEX. Sometime—any time—yes.

ISABEL. *Note.* [*She breaks away quickly.*]

ALEX. Ah, don't spoil our pleasure.

ISABEL. This spoils it.

With a greedy gesture she snatches up the book.

ALEX. It's four years of my life—I don't care—burn it.

ISABEL. Better than wasting the rest of it. Four years of my life it stole, too.

ALEX. [*laughing*] Burn it. Then we're equal.

ISABEL. Then we come to life.

ALEX. Life? [*A shadow passes over Alex.'s face.*] What life? [*Hurriedly.*] Don't turn away—burn it—thrust your white arm against the flame—quick, before like fools, we change.

ISABEL. [*in a sort of ecstasy*] I want to feel the warmth—see our pictures in the flames—altar fires! From the ashes our dreams arise!

ALEX. [*mumbling*] Pictures—dreams—[*calling for help like a child*!—Isabel!

ISABEL. Dearest.

ALEX. [*pitifully*] I seem in—in a fog. I'm trying to set my thoughts to this new life. What is it? Tell me. Where's the future I planned.

ISABEL. [*quavering*] Does—that—call you still?

ALEX. [*dully*] Life's a poor, empty thing.

Suddenly the enormity of her action is realized by Isabel. Her strength leaves her.

ISABEL. [*frightened*] You—you—burn it. I—I can't.

ALEX. What does life offer, anyway?

ISABEL. [*clasping his hand*] We're together always.

ALEX. [*reviving at her touch. Grimly*] Eat and drink and sleep.

ISABEL. And be together.

ALEX. [*laughing unpleasantly*] It'll be fun while it lasts—man and woman.

ISABEL. [*with a sudden revulsion*] Oh, that look in your eyes. I see myself now. How ugly I was! What have we been doing?

She springs away from him, placing the book on the table, and covering her face with her hands.

ALEX. [*as before*] Why not, eh? Heaven knows, we're dead soon enough. [*Sharply.*] Why don't you burn that priggish book? Give it to me. *I'll do it.* All it's damned talk about faith and conscience! I was a schoolboy then.

He snatches the book and makes for the fire. Isabel lifts her face from her hands, like one coming out of a bad dream.

ISABEL. That's over!

ALEX. Live while we can.

ISABEL. Alex.! Give me the book.

ALEX. [*turning to her, wonderingly*] Hello, you're different now!

She confronts him. There is a great calm about her—a touch of nobility perhaps. As though compelled by the look in her eyes, he hands her the book.

ISABEL. [*quietly*] Yes, I'm different now. I didn't know what I was doing, till I caught a look in your eyes as you sat on that sofa.

ALEX. [*uneasily*] Eh? What was I like?

ISABEL. [*slowly*] It was the strange creature in us both.

They are silent. Quietly Isabel replaces the book on the table.

ISABEL. [*measured and calm*] Those eight years have soiled me, Alex. I fought blindly for my ends. I—I had to. I nearly stole your soul.

ALEX. [*quietly*] You're baffling me. What do you mean?

ISABEL. I mean that it's a man who is a poor, empty thing without ambitions, his life's work, the longings of his soul. When I threatened to take those from you by burning your book, the spirit left you—You were a shell. In the years to come you would yearn for the future you had planned, for the old life that had passed you by, just as my life will pass me by. Your eyes would look at me and tell me that it was I who was the thief. No, no. The book, if we burnt it, would be a greater barrier between us than it is now. Keep your book. I won't marry you, Alex.

ALEX. [*to himself*] How small I am!

ISABEL. It's the real Alex. I want—with your fine enthusiasm and your faith—not the shell.

ALEX. [*strongly*] You shall have him—because it's the real Isabel that speaks now. Somehow, before you, as you are now—all my schemes and science seem insignificant. Before your sacrifice they are paltry. Before your love they mean nothing to me. I realize that. Our happiness is everything.

ISABEL. We have found it in ourselves.

ALEX. Just ourselves.

ISABEL. But the book—We can't marry——

ALEX. Justly and firmly we can burn it. It goes down—like all things, before the love that is deep, and pure, and splendid.

ISABEL. [*joyfully*] Oh, Alex. [*Hesitating.*] But

—but is this only the strange creature? How can we tell?

ALEX. Conscience tells.

ISABEL. It's *you* that speaks?

ALEX. My deepest self.

ISABEL. [*lightly*] It seems too good to be true! The happiness of it! It's old times again. [*Moving to window.*] Oh, what a moon! Just like the night— [*her voice trails away.*] Ugh, it's cold, though.

ALEX. [*gaily going to fire and holding book over it*] Two people can always keep the cold from their lives—if they've only got a burning book to do it with.

His eye catches the picture and his hand is stayed.

ISABEL. [*prattling on*] The times to come, Alex.—my eyes turn outwards now. I see our home, Alex. I've got it all planned—a short, shady drive—then a hall, a comfy one—at the end, the nursery—and——

ALEX. Don't!

ISABEL. [*scared by his tone*] What is it? I was only——

ALEX. Come—here—Isabel.

Slowly she goes to him, wonderingly, but with a vague sense of dread. He is staring at the picture. She rests her hands on his shoulders, and follows his eyes.

ISABEL. [*awed*] What do you see?

ALEX. Our home. Aren't you afraid?

ISABEL. [*whispering*] Yes. Terribly afraid.

ALEX. Happiness is not for us two—alone. We fought—those others. Love—even innocent love—was blind to them.

ISABEL. Our children.

ALEX. [*deeply*] Thank God they will never stand before our picture and think the same terrible thoughts that we are thinking. I could tear it down!

ISABEL. It is out of our reach.

ALEX. There is a God.

ISABEL. [*softly*] My father.

ALEX. Crimson threads!

Pause.

ISABEL. [*wearily*] The years I've got to face!

ALEX. You are brave.

ISABEL. Oh, Alex., give me your strength.

ALEX. Yes, yes. And the giving will make me strong. You will be strong, won't you? Promise me.

ISABEL. [*slowly*] Someone is stronger.

They turn to the picture.

ALEX. [*pleading*] Listen, Isabel. Remember that your sacrifice will earn the thanks of unborn millions.

ISABEL. [*half smiling*] Thanks of the unborn—a queer thought.

ALEX. It will be a happiness to you.

ISABEL. Cold happiness for an empty heart!

ALEX. Do listen, Isabel! We are the leaders, you and I—trampling on sentiment and selfishness. Pioneers! Our sacrifice is not vain. Others will heed and follow. We are leaders—think of that!

ISABEL. [*sadly*] Leaders—that means loneliness.

ALEX. It is the pioneer's burden—and his *strength!*
For the moment he is stamped with greatness.

ISABEL. [*looking up at him, a light in her eyes*]
The *real* Alex.—[*Gently he kisses her hand.*] I shall have him with me always—here! [*Touches forehead.*]

Pause. Enter Rev. and Mrs. G., full of prattle.

REV. G. There were *two* engines on the mail, Isabel!

ISABEL. [*vaguely*] Only two?

REV. G. Um! You seem to have plenty to say to one another. What about my sermon, eh? Aha! I'll wager——

MRS. G. David!

REV. G. Er—if I were a sporting man—I'd wager—what is it?—even money?—that you hadn't given a thought to it. [*Picking up sheet of paper.*] Why, here we are—"Unto the third and fourth generation"—a blank sheet! Couldn't Alex. give you some hints for the sermon?

ALEX. I could only give *facts*.

REV. G. Um, a little out of place, perhaps.

ISABEL. I'm sorry I haven't written it, cousin Davy.

REV. G. [*cheerily*] Never mind—"to-morrow and to-morrow," as friend Shakespeare says—or was it Bacon?—I'm not a bit prejudiced on the subject—quite open-minded.

ISABEL. [*turning to him*] I don't mean to write that sermon.

REV. G. Very well, my dear. Suggest another!

ISABEL. "Honour thy father and thy mother."

REV. G. Admirable—easy and obvious—anyone can talk on that—I believe I could dilate——

MRS. G. From the *pulpit*, please, David.

REV. G. Appeals to all classes—the touch of sentiment, eh, Alex.? Crimson threads, you know!——

Silence.

ALEX. Mr. Gildey!

REV. G. Well?

ALEX. I have something to announce in regard to my engagement with Isabel. [*Pause.*] I have broken off the engagement.

REV. G. Alex.!

MRS. G. The man's mad!

REV. G. [*fidgeting*] Come now—surely—some trifling misunderstanding!——

ALEX. It's ended.

REV. G. Why?

ALEX. [*off his guard*] Why!

REV. G. Surely I'm entitled to demand a reason.

ALEX. [*hesitates, then plunges*] When I got engaged—I—well, you see I needed money for my book, my work. I thought at the time—God knows why—that Isabel could help me that way. I was mistaken. That is the reason.

REV. G. [*stoutly*] I don't believe it!

MRS. G. There's some mistake. Isabel, is this?——

ALEX. [*hastily*] I've given my reason.

REV. G. [*staying him*] One minute. [*To Isabel.*] Isabel, is that the real reason? Is it the truth?

Silence, Isabel is very pale.

ISABEL. It—is—the truth. [*With a cry of agony.*] Oh, Alex., forgive me!

Blindly, she rushes from the room.

MRS. G. Poor child!

REV. G. [*indignant*] Sir, I——!

MRS. G. [*quietly*] Best say nothing, David.

REV. G. [*coldly*] The train to the city leaves at eleven-twenty. You have just time.

ALEX. Yes, sir. I'll catch it. [*Picks up overcoat and hat and goes to bay window.*] I—You—[*He struggles with himself. The words do not come. Exit.*]

MRS. G. That man! In our house!

REV. G. We must be very kind to Isabel.

MRS. G. I'll go and soothe——

REV. G. [*stopping her*] Leave her alone, Jane. Loneliness is more soothing.

MRS. G. [*tearfully*] Poor child! It's cruel!

REV. G. [*gently*] My dear old lady, some things we cannot understand. By God's laws everything is for the best.

MRS. G. But, Isabel! What will she do?

REV. G. Everything is for the best.

He guides her out of the room. He returns and puts out the reading lamp—the room is in a half-light—then he moves to the remaining lamp on the centre table. A sudden thought seems to strike him, for he lifts up the lamp and carefully scrutinises the picture—as though to allay a doubt. But the picture meets his stare, cold and inscrutable, a presiding genius over many destinies. The Rev. G. extinguishes the lamp, muttering “Fancy, mere fancy.” He goes out, shutting the door. Darkness. Silence.

One hour elapses.

The handle of the door turns softly. A beam of light severs the darkness. Enter Isabel, carrying a candlestick. Above the flame her face shows the mental agony of the last hour. Her eyes are wide and fixed. Without turning, she shuts the door behind her. Then, as though impelled by some force, she glides steadily, and without pause, towards the side-board.

The shadows that flicker from the candlelight play queer tricks; on glancing at the picture one might almost imagine—but that is fancy, mere fancy.

THE END OF THE PLAY.

ECHOES

A PLAY OF TO-DAY

CHARACTERS

THE FATHER (Robert Rutland)

THE MOTHER (Alice)

THE SON (Selwyn)

SCENE

(From actor's standpoint.)

It is the sitting-room at Robert Rutland's house.

On the LEFT are bay windows with curtains. In front of the windows, so that the light may fall on it, is a heavy desk. A table is in the middle of the room, on which are a biscuit-barrel, a decanter, tumblers and a syphon.

On the RIGHT are the fireplace and mantelpiece and a leather armchair.

Doors—BACK-CENTRE and RIGHT.

Reading-lamp on desk; electric switch near centre door.

Seated in a revolving chair behind the desk is the Father, a huge, ponderous man, with a mop of iron-

grey hair, that lends a certain picturesqueness to a face which is coarse almost to brutality. He is deep in voice, massive in movement, big in everything—except outlook. His imagination, once almost savage in its vividness, has been religiously suppressed till now it only leaps up fitfully and in flickers. So it is with almost all his qualities; they have been wilfully laid on the altars of a false god. He is bending over a pile of documents.

Seated against the centre table is the Mother, a frail, ineffectual woman, with a tendency to tears. She is wiping her eyes with a handkerchief.

FATHER. Stop snivelling.

MOTHER. I couldn't help it.

FATHER. Tears won't cure it. Besides, they annoy me. In short, stop it.

MOTHER. I'm sorry. It's so sudden—after all these years of—of——

FATHER. Well?

MOTHER. Happiness.

FATHER. Tsch! How you women hanker after happiness.

MOTHER. [*sniffing*] It's rare enough, goodness knows.

FATHER. You've had your share. Eh?

MOTHER. I'm not complaining; only with me it seems to have come at the wrong end of life.

FATHER. [*restlessly*] You're getting that sentimental note into your voice. Cut it.

He swings himself protestingly across to the fireplace, a bundle of papers in his hand.

MOTHER. How exactly do we stand?

FATHER. We must economise. Save up money and energy for the final battle.

MOTHER. [*wearily*] The same ceaseless battle. Can't we rest now?

FATHER. Rest! and after all our labour leave nothing behind us but a laugh! [*Abruptly*] The servants——

MOTHER. [*hurriedly*] Oh, Robert—we must do our best——

FATHER. For ourselves—quite so.

MOTHER. Yes, but——

FATHER. [*curtly*] They must go.

MOTHER. All of them?

FATHER. Bridget.

MOTHER. She's been with us eight years.

FATHER. Sack 'er.

MOTHER. [*meekly*] Yes, Robert. When shall I——?

FATHER. Now.

MOTHER. Wouldn't to-morrow——?

FATHER. To-night.

MOTHER. Very well. [*Laying a timid hand on his shoulder.*] What—what shall I say?

FATHER. [*thoughtfully*] Tell her that owing to a sudden change in our position—financial position—temporary change. Tell her nothing. Just sack her.

MOTHER. Suppose she offers to stay in spite——

FATHER. Sack her all the more. We can't take favours.

MOTHER. Why not?

FATHER. [*cunningly*] What a tale she'd tell the

town! I don't give them a laugh so easily as that. The bickering, gossip-mongering town—a limb of Hell, that's what it is. It licks your hand; purrs with sympathy—and, like a cat, gets ready to spring. I know it.

MOTHER. Poor Bridget!

FATHER. [*fiercely*] Who's Bridget that we should weep for her?

MOTHER. She's a human being. [*Sits in armchair.*]

FATHER. H'm! Judging from the majority of human beings, that's no compliment. I suppose you would call Peter Saunders a human being.

MOTHER. He—he resembles one.

FATHER. He has arms and legs—as far as one can see. Well, a week ago that “human being” raised his hat to me every morning. What do you think he did to-day?

MOTHER. I don't know.

FATHER. He nodded—H'm!—you're all the same—you human beings—wait till you get a man down, then join hands and dance rings round him. Peter Saunders—I felt inclined to knock his hat off and his head with it.

MOTHER. [*nervous*] Robert, you didn't really——

FATHER. No, I shall wait—wait—and make him take it off of his own free will. That will taste sweeter. I'll make 'em all do it. How they have cringed and crawled and sneaked and laid plans—Why, my own friends were in league with them, telling the others my trade secrets—that's the way they got me down.

MOTHER. [*quietly*] It's human nature.

FATHER. I blush for the race.

MOTHER. Is it worth commencing the struggle all over again?

FATHER. [*expounding his religion*] Would you have the business, my father's business, snuff out like a candle? I must leave something behind me. When I was a young man I asked many things of life; *now*, I ask but one—Permanence. That alone can redeem life from the shadow to the substance: Permanence! It will keep me warm in the grave. But to gutter out like—like *other* men! To me that's madness! [*Walks left.*]

MOTHER. I'm satisfied.

FATHER. Have you no pride in me? Perhaps you're not satisfied with me. Eh?

MOTHER. I've said I'm not complaining.

FATHER. [*snorting*] I should think not. Look round at your other "human beings" and then look at me. I don't drink. I don't gamble nor fool with women, nor thrust my pleasures on you.

MOTHER. [*softly*] Sometimes I wish you had.

FATHER. [*shocked*] Where's your religion, woman?

MOTHER. That is only a substitute.

FATHER. [*looking at her keenly*] And you talk of human nature: are there depths in you I haven't fathomed?

MOTHER. Impossible. I am talking nonsense.

FATHER. An old habit.

MOTHER. But I was just thinking——

FATHER. A new habit.

MOTHER. [*tearfully*] It's too bad—it's not my fault——

FATHER. [*coldly*] Go on—you think——

MOTHER. That if you had treated the others a little more kindly—they wouldn't have turned on you.

FATHER. Would you have me lie down in this ant-nest of a town and give them all a meal—out of kindness? In this world some have got to trample and some be trampled on.

MOTHER. You're one of the trampers.

FATHER. I am.

MOTHER. But the others aren't ants—they're men.

FATHER. [*with magnificent contempt*] Men! That's what they're called in the dictionary!

MOTHER. Do you think you can beat them all a second time?

FATHER. I'll beat them at their own game—the game of cunning and cut-throat.

MOTHER. The game you despise?

FATHER. [*grimly*] It's human nature.

MOTHER. Does all that trampling—and—hat-lifting—mean a lot to you?

FATHER. [*centre*] It's my life. In their heart of hearts it's every man's life, aye, and every woman's too. What else do we toil for and dress up for but to have our friends run our messages and strangers turn and look at us in the street?

MOTHER. [*twistfully*] What does it feel like to have people turn and look at you?

FATHER. Gives you the joy of living.

MOTHER. [*slowly*] Robert—to what a handful of sensations—to what a thimbleful of philosophy have you reduced that "joy of living."

FATHER. [*patronisingly, though secretly flattered*] And what, in a word, is your notion of my philosophy?

MOTHER. In a word—Power.

FATHER. [*approving*] Right—for once. [*Walks about and declaims with force.*] Power; do you call that a thimbleful of philosophy? Open your mind, woman, and let the voice of all things flood in—then listen—listen to the song. You pretend that it is Faith, or Love, or Beauty. I tell you it is Power! Does the workman sweat for Beauty, or the scientist for Love, or the student for Faith? It is Power, or the hope of it. You call the rainbow a sign of peace—it is the smile of triumph. The sense of Power is in all things, from the embrace of the lover to the blossom of the flowers. The very song which Nature sends up from the whirring of her faultless machinery—what is it?—Power, Power, Power!

Pause.

MOTHER. [*shaking her head*] How you twist things!

FATHER. Why am I trying to convince you?

MOTHER. Is it me?

FATHER. Who else?

MOTHER. I wonder—Is there a place in your scheme of life for children? What does Selwyn mean to you? Do you translate *him* in terms of power?

FATHER. [*moodily*] Perhaps—under the present circumstances—Yes.

MOTHER. [*frightened*] You're not serious.

FATHER. [*mockingly*] Oh, no! I'm a buffoon.

MOTHER. What a struggle—for us two.

FATHER. I'll pull through. I'm not afraid to start the battle all over again.

MOTHER. [*quietly*] It was the boy I was thinking of.

FATHER. It always is.

MOTHER. What an end to his dreams!

FATHER. [*curtly*] Young men at college don't have dreams.

MOTHER. Will he have to come back from college before he finishes his course?

FATHER. His fees are all paid?

MOTHER. Oh, yes.

FATHER. When does he sit for his final exam.?

MOTHER. In a month or so.

FATHER. [*fmrly*] He must finish; that's imperative—a lot depends on Master Selwyn. [*Sarcastically.*] Selwyn!—what a name!—that's your doing. [*Sits at desk again.*]

MOTHER. I didn't think there was any harm in his having a nice name.

FATHER. What good will it do him in business?

MOTHER. [*her fears realized*] Surely—surely, Robert, you're not going to force him into that wretched business! It's caused enough misery——

FATHER. Wretched business! It's given the boy his education as an engineer.

MOTHER. It's well enough for some.

FATHER. Well enough for the father, but not for the son, eh? I tell you that if I'm to win back what we've lost—patch up the wreckage—I must have someone at my right hand whom I can trust as myself—not a spy in the camp. Someone who will add the energy of youth to my experience—someone whose

interests will be my interests, whose brain will be my brain—Selwyn is the man!

MOTHER. He may refuse.

FATHER. [*swinging round*] What! Why?

MOTHER. He has a soul of his own.

FATHER. He's too sensible for that.

MOTHER. Dreams, ambitions—perhaps.

FATHER. What nobler dream, finer ambition than to help his father in his life's work?

MOTHER. If you didn't want him to think and choose for himself, why send him to the 'Varsity?

FATHER. They don't teach them to do that there.

MOTHER. He's an exception.

FATHER. Pooh! Nowadays everyone is an exception.

MOTHER. [*looking at him*] Did you think and choose?

FATHER. I followed my father's footsteps, proud to continue the tradition. There was no alternative. Do you think I would have put a boyish whim before that?—even if I had one. I was the second link in the chain—a weak link, it seems—Selwyn is the third. [*With soft intensity*]. In a dream—my only dream—I see that chain stretching down the future—stretching until imagination falters! It's a big thought. How could a man choose otherwise?

MOTHER. That was in another generation.

FATHER. Men don't change. [*He pours out a drink at the centre table.*]

MOTHER. But the generation has changed—and with it, men's views and outlook.

He scrutinises her suspiciously over his glass, fear-

ing that there is some foundation for her protests. He seats himself opposite to her, resolved to reach the truth.

FATHER. What have you heard about Selwyn?

MOTHER. I was merely thinking——

FATHER. [*curtly*] Don't let the habit grow on you. [*Squirts syphon.*] If you're not careful you'll be reading modern plays next—and that'll mean an end of your usefulness. [*Sits left at table.*] Well—you were thinking?

MOTHER. That perhaps his peculiar temperament——

FATHER. [*snorting*] Temperament! What does he want with a temperament? I never had one. Good God, what with the labour movement in the lower classes and the temperament movement in the upper, commercial success will become a disgrace, and home-life an Aunt-Sally. What do you mean by the boy's temperament? He's top at his work—does he hanker after some will-o'-the-wisp?

MOTHER. He has literary tastes.

FATHER. The University will cure that. [*Walks fireplace and looks into fire.*]

MOTHER. It hasn't.

FATHER. Oho!—How long has this been going on?

MOTHER. About six months.

FATHER. How do you know?

MOTHER. He—he told me.

FATHER. [*cowering her*] The last long vacation occurred eight months ago; he has not been home since. His voice seems to carry a long way.

MOTHER. He writes letters.

FATHER. To *me*, and I read them aloud.

MOTHER. Once or twice he wrote to me about little things he wanted—clothes—and cakes——

FATHER. Does he think it requires a genius to understand his wants?

MOTHER. Perhaps he regards a mother as a substitute for that genius. [*Facing him.*] You might at least respect me for being his mother.

FATHER. I respect no one for being a mother. You women can't help being mothers any more than you can help having arms and eyes. Must we worship you for being born human? Nowadays we face facts and it's time that pretty fiction went overboard. Now will you please read the letter you received from him this morning.

MOTHER. [*starting*] You knew all the time?

FATHER. Of course.

MOTHER. Why all these questions?

FATHER. It amused me.

MOTHER. [*flaring up*] Cat and mouse! I won't be bullied about my private letters.

FATHER. You're frightened. You've been conspiring with him to revolt against me.

MOTHER. That's infamous, and you know it.

FATHER. [*quietly*] Read the letter.

MOTHER. [*produces a letter from her blouse; sits R. table.*] "Dear Mum, I hope you are quite well"—he always begins that way—"My work is going well, and I am confident about the exams.—though I am seriously handicapped by having ideas of my own. I have been writing a good deal in my spare time. . . ."

FATHER. He ought not to have any spare time.

MOTHER. "My efforts have been attended with

success, as Austin—you remember, the chap who set fire to the Warden's bush-house—a fine fellow and a great mate of mine—has got me the offer of a position on his father's newspaper. I refused, as I did not think I would have to work for a living."

FATHER. That idea must be nipped in the bud.

MOTHER. "Nothing has happened here; it never does. I feel restless. That sounds funny in a chap my age; but there are times when I long to slip the curb and give the forces in me full rein. Perhaps I will some day."

FATHER. Eh?

MOTHER. "Will write again soon—your loving son—Selwyn."

FATHER. H'm! Any postscript?

MOTHER. No.

FATHER. Nothing?

MOTHER. Nothing—of importance——

FATHER. Read it.

MOTHER. It's only sentiment.

FATHER. Show it me.

MOTHER. [*rising*] I shall do no such thing.

FATHER. [*rising*] Show it to me, I say.

MOTHER. Why?

FATHER. It's my right.

MOTHER. [*facing him*] That—for your right! [*Looking him provokingly in the face, she tears the letter to pieces.*]

FATHER. [*between his teeth*] You——!

MOTHER. [*smiling*] Does that—frighten you?

FATHER. [*thundering*] No! It has no effect! Not because I believe what you say, but because I

believe in my knowledge of the boy. He's all right. This "temperament" of his will blow over. He'll stick to his father—with the brains and ambitions I've given him, how can he do otherwise? [*Leans over papers on desk.*] The business will become "Robert Rutland and Son." How does that sound, eh? That means success. What more could you demand for him?

MOTHER. I demand his happiness.

FATHER. How can you be happy without success? "Robert Rutland and Son"—youth and age. It's irresistible—I'm going upstairs to work. To bed with you.

MOTHER. [*mechanically*] Will you lock up the house? And don't forget the kitchen door.

FATHER. Right. Father and Son of the future—doesn't that make your heart leap? "Robert Rutland and Son"—doesn't that set your thoughts ablaze? [*He goes out R.*] "Robert Rutland and Son."

His voice booms in the distance. She remains listening a moment, then moves to the switch and turns light out. Darkness, save for lamp on desk. Silence. Then the sound of a latch-key and a footstep in the hall.

MOTHER. [*in a nervous whisper*] Who's that?

A VOICE. Alright—only me.

MOTHER. Who is it?

A VOICE. Selwyn.

He enters, though he can hardly be seen in the darkness.

MOTHER. Good gracious, boy!—Why?—What?—

SELWYN. Pleased to see me?

MOTHER. I can't see you—wait there till I turn up the light. What brings you home like this? [*Leads him down L.*]

SELWYN. [*sullenly*] Is there any objection to my coming home?

MOTHER. Don't be silly—What's the matter?

SELWYN. Why should anything be the matter?

At this moment she turns up the light, revealing Selwyn to be a young, well-dressed man of twenty-two. He has his father's firm mouth and strong jaw, but his eyes and nose bespeak a thoughtfulness and refinement that he must have received from his mother. He is obviously ill at ease, as though an ordeal were before him.

MOTHER. [*taking him by the shoulders*] Now, let me have a good look at you. Haven't you got a kiss for me? [*They kiss.*]

SELWYN. I'm all right. [*Crosses to fireplace.*]

MOTHER. Quite, quite sure?

SELWYN. Of course.

MOTHER. Then what has brought you all this way?

SELWYN. [*impatiently*] I suppose I can come home if I want to.

MOTHER. It's so late.

SELWYN. I came by the only train.

MOTHER. Without giving us any warning.

SELWYN. [*bitterly*] I'm sorry if it's not visitors' hours.

MOTHER. [*hurt*] Don't talk like that, Selwyn. You know perfectly well that we always *love* to see you, but you said yourself that the exams. would keep you another month.

SELWYN. Things have altered. Where's father?

MOTHER. Working.

SELWYN. [*starting*] I thought you'd all be in bed.

MOTHER. I'll go and tell him you've come.

SELWYN. [*hastily*] Not yet—plenty of time.

MOTHER. Well, I must go and get your room ready. Did you bring any things with you?

SELWYN. Bag in the hall.

MOTHER. When are you going back?

SELWYN. I'm *not* going back.

MOTHER. [*aghast*] What—what about the exams.?

SELWYN. Exams. aren't everything.

MOTHER. Something must have happened.

SELWYN. Something has happened.

MOTHER. [*hysterically*] What made you come home to-night of all nights! If you only knew what I've suffered already. Is the trouble never going to end?
[*Sits L. table.*]

SELWYN. Trouble? Is father quite well?

MOTHER. Quite well—in health.

SELWYN. He works too hard. You ought to take him away for a complete rest. I always said so.

MOTHER. That means money.

SELWYN. Money! He's so afraid of spending sixpence! Anyone would think——[*Moving to table.*]

MOTHER. You can't spend what you haven't got.

Pause. Selwyn stops short.

SELWYN. [*slowly*] So that's—that's the trouble.

MOTHER. The business has gone to pieces.

SELWYN. Does that—mean—much?

MOTHER. We're ruined. It's been going on steadily—only to-night did he choose to tell *me*.

SELWYN. [*in pain*] Why didn't I know that? I ought to have been told—it makes me stand out black—it's not fair to me. [*Back to fire.*]

MOTHER. It's not fair to either of us that we should suffer for his *sins*. [*Rises.*]

SELWYN. Mother!

MOTHER. [*with a strange and sudden harshness*] Yes, his sins, I say. Why can't we speak our real thoughts and live our real lives without this suffocating burden of pretence? Make a man of yourself, no matter if you make a mess of others.

SELWYN. We seem to have made a mess of ourselves.

MOTHER. It's only temporary, so your father says. [*Sits armchair*] He means to start all over again—and win. That's why he relies on you.

SELWYN. [*starting*] What's that?

MOTHER. He relies on you.

SELWYN. [*laughing foolishly*] That's—funny.

MOTHER. You're destined to help him in the battle.

SELWYN. Battle?

MOTHER. Restlessness, tension, anxiety, mean failure and meaner triumph—the old ceaseless battle—
[*Covering her face with her hands.*] How I hate it—hate it!

SELWYN. [*gently*] Poor mother! [*Sitting beside her on the chair.*]

MOTHER. [*dropping her hands*] It's the same for all of us. You, Selwyn, at least have the opportunity of *doing* things. [*Quietly.*] I think you owe us something.

SELWYN. I owe *you* everything—I realize that.

MOTHER. We put our future on to you.

SELWYN. [*squirming*] Don't, *don't!* [*Rises and sits R. table.*]

MOTHER. [*soothingly, laying hand on his shoulder.*] The strength and the confidence will come. [*Fussily.*] And now, a little something before going to bed. A drop of whisky—so—There now—come along. [*Selwyn makes no move; he is plunged in dark thoughts.*] [*Firmly.*] Selwyn!

SELWYN. [*waking with a start*] Hello! Yes, mother?

MOTHER. [*laying a hand on his shoulder*] What has brought you here?

SELWYN. [*vaguely*] Oh—something.

MOTHER. The examinations?

SELWYN. I've left the University. [*Goes fireplace.*]

MOTHER. Selwyn—you couldn't—

SELWYN. I had no idea of what had happened here. It makes me feel a beast. But I won't be a burden, anyhow. I accepted the position on that newspaper.

MOTHER. [*dazed*] You—accepted it? [*Sits R. table.*]

SELWYN. I warned you in the postscript. What do you say?—Tell me what you think of me—quick! [*Moves to her side.*]

MOTHER. Wait, Selwyn—one little thing. Is this life that you are planning a fairy-tale to you?

SELWYN. What do you mean?

MOTHER. [*as in a dream*] When we are children people give us toys——

SELWYN. Of course.

MOTHER. And we make fairy-tales about them.

SELWYN. Yes; but now in real life——

MOTHER. Real life! How proud you men are of that word! Isn't life sometimes—just sometimes—a fairy-tale to you?

SELWYN. [*afire*] You mean the whole big thing? Why, yes.

MOTHER. There are toys that we never lose till someone—perhaps we ourselves—breaks them. And then there are fairy-tales that are always real—more real than life—till someone steals them from us.

SELWYN. [*softly*] I never knew you were like this—like me.

MOTHER. Selwyn, don't let anyone rob you of your fairy-tale.

SELWYN. Who wants to?

A voice in the distance booms cheerily—"Robert Rutland and Son." The voice approaches.

SELWYN. [*frightened*] He's coming—you must stand up for me.

MOTHER. [*strongly*] Stand up to him yourself. Don't let him steal your life.

SELWYN. I'm in the wrong. [*Moves down L.*]

MOTHER. What does that matter? [*Fiercely.*] Only we weak people are in the wrong. Stand up to him—be strong—and then, perhaps, you will be right.

Enter the father. He surveys the scene.

FATHER. What's this?

MOTHER. [*hurriedly*] Robert—it's Selwyn.

FATHER. Selwyn.

SELWYN. [*rising*] I—I've come home.

FATHER. [*grimly*] My meagre intelligence had already grasped that obscure fact. [*In front of fireplace.*]

MOTHER. [*nervously*] Isn't it nice to have the boy home, Robert?

FATHER. The return of the dutiful son.

MOTHER. Yes; he wanted so much to see us.

FATHER. [*sarcastically*] H'm! What a picture of filial affection he presents.

MOTHER. Don't talk like that, Robert; you don't know the facts.

FATHER. [*curtly*] Let us alone.

MOTHER. [*trying to explain*] You see, Robert——

FATHER. Hasn't the boy got a tongue of his own?

SELWYN. I'll explain.

FATHER. He speaks; he has a tongue. I, too, have a tongue.

MOTHER. [*quietly*] I've noticed that.

FATHER. Sarcasm? Let it pass! Well, two tongues are ample to cope with the facts of Master Selwyn's case.

MOTHER. [*desperately*] For all you know the boy might be at death's door.

FATHER. We lack your tears and hysterics to constitute a death scene. The boy is well. Let us alone.

MOTHER. Can't we sit down quietly?

FATHER. Leave us, I say.

MOTHER. [*as she goes*] Selwyn, remember——

FATHER. Enough!

Selwyn catches the message in her eye. She passes out. With ominous deliberation the father closes the door, and then with a half-smile surveys the form of Selwyn. Slowly he strolls to the centre table, taking his time about it, for he is trying to enjoy the situation. The bitterness and wrath within him find their first expression in a spirit of cruel gaiety. He lifts up the untasted glass of whisky and speaks banteringly.

FATHER. I regret that the beverage of the father is not approved of by the son. Come, it will perk you up for the interview. Teetotaller?

SELWYN. No.

FATHER. H'm. And to what are we indebted for this well-timed and cheerful visit?

SELWYN. Father—I feel a cad.

FATHER. You look it.

SELWYN. Don't goad me.

FATHER. [*raising his eyebrows*] Will it bite? Is it dangerous? And so—and so—you've left the University?

SELWYN. [*starting*] How did you know?

FATHER. I am not without my inspirations.

SELWYN. I thought to strike out alone—I simply had to.

FATHER. And the exams.?

SELWYN. I can't go back now. [*Sits L. table.*] I'm sorry—I didn't know——

FATHER. [*contemptuously*] Stand up and answer like a man! Stop playing the Prodigal Son and Mary Magdalene in that chair! Stand up! [*Selwyn obeys;*

the father folds his arms and regards his son with grim humour.] Question No. 1—Are you my son?

SELWYN. For pity's sake——

FATHER. Yes or no, sir?

SELWYN. [*faintly*] Yes.

FATHER. [*bowing in mockery*] You flatter me. For the moment I had a doubt. I am reassured at your generous statement. I thank you.

SELWYN. [*miserably*] Let's talk straight. For God's sake drop this pantomime.

FATHER. [*in surprise*] Pantomime! So far the situation seemed devoid of frivolity. Perhaps I cannot aspire to your keenness of humour. However, since you tire of this method, perhaps you will be so good as to take one of your father's chairs.

Selwyn sits at table R. Then, like a flash, his father's mood changes and his voice becomes harsh and bullying.

FATHER. How long have you been home?

SELWYN. Ten minutes.

FATHER. Time enough for your mother to tell you the state of affairs?

SELWYN. Yes.

FATHER. What do you say?

SELWYN. I—I don't know.

FATHER. Your opinion?

SELWYN. I haven't decided.

FATHER. Not got one?

SELWYN. No.

FATHER. So much the better. I have; and one opinion is ample for this house.

SELWYN. I'm very sorry—of course, father.

FATHER. [*brusquely*] Wipe that father and son sentiment off the slate. You'll have to earn your daily bread now.

SELWYN. [*quietly*] I've made provision for that.

FATHER. In your mind—good.

SELWYN. In fact.

FATHER. Eh?

SELWYN. I didn't mean to come home empty-handed. I was prepared in case you——

FATHER. In case I—well?

SELWYN. Turned nasty.

FATHER. Oho! and what, pray, is an example of a father “turning nasty?”

SELWYN. [*rising*] Your conduct for the last ten minutes.

FATHER. It *can* bite! So you came prepared—for what?

SELWYN. To defend my independence.

FATHER. [*roaring*] Independence! [*Stamps down L.*] So you're soaked in that modern jargon, are you?—The claims of temperament, the realization of the soul! Independence, indeed! Only those who have faced the struggle and the strife can claim that prize—only those who have found a god in themselves, one who never stoops to forgiveness, a god sterner than any of the figures men have made out of their dreams. When you have found him and can face him you may claim your independence. It is not for boys or women, so wipe the word from your vocabulary!

SELWYN. [*quietly*] I was armed for this, too.

FATHER. [*sneering*] You bristle with defences.

SELWYN. In a letter I wrote my mother——

FATHER. I know.

SELWYN. How? You open her letters?

FATHER. She read it aloud.

SELWYN. With you standing over her.

FATHER. [*calmly*] I was standing by the fireplace.

SELWYN. She read it *all*?

FATHER. Yes—er—almost.

SELWYN. I mentioned that I had been offered a position as a journalist——

FATHER. [*snapping*] A scurrilous scribbler—wandering about the streets with long hair, the emptiness of the pocket only equalled by that of his head! You refused, of course; you said so.

SELWYN. [*firmly*] Yesterday—I accepted.

The effect is electrical. With the roar of a beast his father rushes at him.

FATHER. Accepted! Smash my life, would you?—You little——

Selwyn does not move, but something in his attitude and the levelness of his eye checks his father. Selwyn's manhood has leapt up with the instinct of physical preservation. He is master of the scene.

SELWYN. [*steadily*] You've smashed your own life now—every word sent a castle tumbling.

FATHER. [*realizing his disadvantage*] I—the instinct of the moment, the shock, and—and so on.

SELWYN. [*curtly*] Don't apologize.

FATHER. [*savagely*] You clutch any excuse.

SELWYN. [*strongly*] I want no excuse; you asked me to stand up and answer like a man. As a dutiful

son I obey. You get your wish and its consequences. We're level, now—man to man—not son to father. There's a difference. That sounds irony, but there's truth in it, nevertheless.

FATHER. [*damping his oratory*] H'm!—why this—er—pantomime?

SELWYN. [*retorting*] The situation is fast gaining in frivolity.

FATHER. [*coming to facts*] What's your plan?—expound it.

SELWYN. Simply that I have accepted the offer. I return to work immediately, unless——

FATHER. Well?

SELWYN. Unless I change my mind. [*Walks fireplace.*]

FATHER. Ah! [*He clutches at this straw and rallies himself to the simple task of changing his son's mind.*] It's a hard life, Selwyn.

SELWYN. My eyes are wide open.

FATHER. The rewards are negligible.

SELWYN. Rewards measure nothing.

FATHER. Only the young say that. The work is heavy.

SELWYN. I've faced that.

FATHER. Do you call that "liberty?"

SELWYN. There are different liberties.

FATHER. You will have no social position, or obedience from others.

SELWYN. [*with finality*] I have chosen.

FATHER. [*breaking out*] And what right have you to choose? How can you—a mere unit—put a whim against generations?

SELWYN. The monument has crumbled.

FATHER. You can rebuild it. [*Walks up to him.*] Have you no pride in you—doesn't your blood call to you? The name you carry into the future—your family and the things they've done, and the big ambitions that drove them—What does all that mean to you?

SELWYN. [*turning*] Nothing.

FATHER. [*bitterly*] I suppose that is what your mother would call "human nature." *Inhuman.*

SELWYN. [*calmly*] Because I don't agree with my father?

FATHER. Where would you be without your father? Answer me that.

SELWYN. [*unruffled*] I admit that by the cruel laws of Nature a father of some sort is a necessity, but only cowards make a *virtue* of necessity.

FATHER. I gave you life.

SELWYN. In an outburst of generosity: Life—that was your unconditional gift. I accept it. It's mine now—to waste, to make—Mine to fashion as I will.

FATHER. [*snapping*] Take it, and go to the devil with it!

SELWYN. Yes, I'd sooner go to the devil my own way than to heaven your way—or anybody else's for that matter.

The father decides on a change of tactics.

FATHER. Come, now; what's your objection to my business?

SELWYN. [*walks front table*] To me it spells torture—prison—I'm not an unpractical dreamer

either. But I've seen other men who were weak enough to drift or to be led from their own path and to follow somebody else's—perhaps for the same sentimental reasons that you advocate. What's been the result? They've gradually become like beasts in a cage, peering out at what they might have been, beating themselves crazy against the bars until they're too tired even for that—and then for the rest of their wasted lives pacing up and down, up and down. No cage for me! [*Crosses R.*]

FATHER. H'm! You didn't always think that. Doesn't take long for the rats to desert the sinking ship.

SELWYN. I feel it no duty to spend my life in keeping afloat the ship you've mismanaged.

FATHER. [*throwing up his hands*] What a son! A nice investment you've been!

SELWYN. [*smiling*] Ah! I thought I was more of an investment than a son. In future, you must find other souls to gamble with.

FATHER. You talk to your father like that! I sent you to the University in the fond hopes they might turn out a gentleman.

SELWYN. I turned myself out—that's some recommendation.

FATHER. [*subsiding into sentiment*] Selwyn—I—Selwyn, my boy——

SELWYN. [*coldly*] Wipe that father and son sentiment off the slate.

FATHER. [*quietly*] You're scoring now. But, listen, I counted on you. [*Laying a hand on his shoulder.*]

I want you. I'm getting old and on you rests my happiness. Well?

SELWYN. [*quietly*] You've had your share of happiness. It's my turn now.

FATHER. [*breaking out*] Good God, man, you can't leave me stranded—on a level with Peter Saunders and his crew. You can't do it.

SELWYN. [*motionless*] I go my own way.

The father looks at him and again shifts his ground.

FATHER. Have some supper. Draw up. Fill your pipe. Let's yarn. [*They sit at table.*] Of course, from the business point of view——

SELWYN. The *personal* point of view, if you please.

FATHER. Even there the advantages——

SELWYN. Are in going one's own way.

FATHER. And dragging your father's grey hairs——

SELWYN. [*curtly*] Let's taboo the "grey hairs" argument. It's overdone.

FATHER. I appeal to you as your father.

SELWYN. [*quaintly*] I was afraid you'd do that. If you appeal to my better feelings you must win. [*After a moment's thought.*] Well, there's my life—I give it you.

FATHER. But I won't take it.

SELWYN. What now?

FATHER. [*proudly*] I don't appeal to any man's better feelings.

SELWYN. Well, what is to decide the question?

FATHER. Why be ashamed to let selfishness decide?

SELWYN. [*back at table; rising and speaking with deep force*] That's it! It's my egotism against yours,

selfishness against selfishness. And why not? All the other causes worth fighting for have been lost. We have only *ourselves* to champion now. You crave for power to mould others at your will; I—for power to mould myself at my own will. We are fighting desperately *with* our egotism *for* our egotism. Our battle is the same. It is only the battle-cry that differs.

FATHER. [*strongly*] Mine is the best.

SELWYN. Prove it.

FATHER. There's no argument you'll listen to.

SELWYN. There's *one* argument.

FATHER. At last! The dawn of sanity.

SELWYN. Listen! I am following in your footsteps—in the way of selfishness. Will you admit to me now that your life, your way, has been *wrong*? Admit it, and my faith is shattered. That is the one argument. Well?

FATHER. [*hedging*] What—admit that all I've done—my work——

SELWYN. [*pressing him*] Admit it.

FATHER. But the circumstances——

SELWYN. Admit it.

FATHER. No.

SELWYN. [*quietly*] I've won.

Pause.

FATHER. [*smiling*] But the triumph is mine.
[*Rises.*]

SELWYN. [*surprised*] What illusion have you got now?

FATHER. It's *you* who are under the illusion—you flatter yourself that you have beaten me with your

own words and your own thoughts. Fool! the voice you use is mine; the thoughts that have coloured yours are mine; the blood that rebels in you is mine. You see, it is a father's victory!

SELWYN. A father's illusion.

FATHER. [*defiantly*] Shatter it if you can.

SELWYN. [*slowly choosing his words*] Easily! Looking back over this interview—getting—as it were—outside ourselves—I see that the voice I used was not altogether mine, certainly not yours.

FATHER. [*contemptuously*] A pretty excuse. Be proud of your voice, sir. It is the oldest of all; the voice that created the world; the voice of Ego—Ego.

SELWYN. [*grimly*] A paternal inheritance—you know no other.

FATHER. I am not ashamed of it.

SELWYN. You have no shame.

FATHER. Ah! That's my strength.

Pause.

SELWYN. [*slowly*] I admire—you.

FATHER. [*regaining his good humour at the touch of flattery*] You admire your own father! Strange sentiments for a modern son!

SELWYN. [*gravely*] But you are not a modern father.

FATHER. Indeed! Of what age am I, pray?

SELWYN. You're a relic of the age of inventions, machinery and all that. You fondly imagined that your son would be a continuation of yourself, another link in the chain, eh? You forgot that I belonged to another age, that in reality you were begetting a new

generation, with different ideas and that spoke in a voice strange to you. [*Vaguely.*] Perhaps I have caught its echo.

FATHER. [*contemptuously*] You spoil your victory with that admission. Claim the voice yourself.

SELWYN. Who can tell where his voice comes from? [*Sternly.*] But this I do know: there is another behind me, the voice of one whose thoughts, like yours, have coloured mine; whose blood, like yours, runs in my veins. Have you forgotten that other? My rebellion is hers too.

They look at one another.

FATHER. Your mother?

SELWYN. [*nodding*] So you have a conscience.

FATHER. [*blustering*] And how dare you treat your mother as though she were an ordinary woman?

SELWYN. A crime of which you will never be accused.

FATHER. What do you mean? She's free.

SELWYN. [*quickly*] To leave you.

FATHER. She's not a prisoner. The door stands open.

SELWYN. Will you *tell* her that?

FATHER. She knows. I'm not a gaoler.

SELWYN. Ah, but will you hold the door open for her?

FATHER. You're trying to frighten me.

SELWYN. No need.

FATHER. [*fiercely*] Why should I tell her? Answer me that!

SELWYN. [*slowly*] Because you—*must*.

FATHER. [*bowing*] The son commands; the father obeys.

SELWYN. It's yourself who will command. You said you were a god unto yourself. Well, a god can admit no fear. You will tell her.

FATHER. That's a bold reliance.

SELWYN. [*smiling*] I have faith in your Ego.

FATHER. [*furiously*] Idiot!

SELWYN. [*quietly*] We shall see. [*He turns to the window, and the atmosphere of the scene relaxes.*] What a night!

FATHER. Stormy?

SELWYN. When I sneaked home the stars were as clear as crystals—Yes, they are still shining.

FATHER. [*surprised*] Are they? Cold though! [*Crosses to fireplace.*]

SELWYN. Grand thought! There is always a dawn for those who go out to meet it.

FATHER. It'll be a bitter dawn for you, leaving your father's house. To your last hour you'll have remorse for this.

SELWYN. [*turning*] It's worth it.

FATHER. You don't know remorse.

SELWYN. [*quickly*] Do you?

FATHER. No!

SELWYN. Ah, so far you are only a god unto yourself. The Judge and Jury have yet to come.

He turns and picks up his hat and coat, then comes back to his father.

SELWYN. [*quietly*] I'm sorry, father, for what I've

said to-night, but I'm not sorry for what I'm doing, and I never shall be.

FATHER. Nor I.

SELWYN. I wonder.

For a moment they confront one another, each trying to probe the other's future. Then Selwyn turns and goes out. His father remains motionless. The hall door slams. Still he makes no move. Silence. Then suddenly the mother's voice calls—"Rob-ert! Rob-ert!" He wakes with a start, and after a moment's struggle replies, a little huskily—

FATHER. I want you. There is something I must tell you.

Enter the mother.

MOTHER. Where's Selwyn?

FATHER. Gone.

MOTHER. Where?

FATHER. Don't know.

MOTHER. You didn't ask him?

FATHER. Details escaped us.

MOTHER. When does he return?

FATHER. [*grimly*] He *doesn't* return.

MOTHER. [*softly*] So he *did* go.

FATHER. [*curtly*] No tears now.

MOTHER. I'm not crying.

FATHER. Why not? You ought to.

MOTHER. He's happy.

FATHER. Happy! That toy again!

MOTHER. [*wistfully*] Gone—into the open world—

FATHER. [*abruptly*] Alice—there's the door.

MOTHER. I—I know that.

FATHER. I hold the door open; you are at liberty to follow Selwyn.

MOTHER. Of course.

FATHER. Of course! Where's your gratitude?

MOTHER. [*curiously*] Why are you suddenly telling me this?

FATHER. My sense of justice.

MOTHER. [*unimpressed*] I wonder where the boy will sleep to-night. I do hope, Robert, he won't lie down in the damp, in a ditch, or somewhere equally foolish.

FATHER. Judging from the manner Master Selwyn treats his parents I should say there was small chance of his ever submitting to personal discomfort. [*Stands fireplace.*]

MOTHER. [*relieved*] That's reassuring. [*She walks to the window and stands looking out into the night.*] What a glow there is over the town! You can hear it murmuring in its sleep, faint as an echo. How restless it is, tormented by all those grand, passionate, silly dreams that never quite leave us.

FATHER. Come, now, this isn't a fairy-tale.

MOTHER. It was once—to both of us——

FATHER. [*slowly*] Once upon a time, eh?

MOTHER. [*softly*] Yes, once upon a time. That was before your philosophy of power had closed us in its prison. And now the boy is gone, Robert, where is your Permanence?

Silence.

FATHER. [*deeply*] Well—there is freedom outside

—you may go back to your fairy-tale—the door is open. What do you say?

She turns and looks at him vaguely.

MOTHER. [*gently*] Poor Robert!

FATHER. [*twincing*] Pshaw! That's no answer.

MOTHER. I'm sorry; I promised not to pity you. That would give me too much power, wouldn't it?

FATHER. Your answer?

MOTHER. [*quietly*] That there are greater things than freedom.

FATHER. [*relieved*] You are of my generation.

MOTHER. I—I didn't think I had a generation. Perhaps I am of every generation.

FATHER. You elect to stay?

MOTHER. Yes.

FATHER. [*in triumph*] Aha! I am too strong for you.

MOTHER. [*looking at him with a flash in her eyes*] Be careful; don't tempt me.

FATHER. I have lost my fear—to-morrow—the battle.

MOTHER. [*limply*] Your battle—all over again.

Her hands drop to her side. Listlessly she moves towards the door. Her voice slips back to its old mechanical note.

MOTHER. I'm going to sle—to lie down. Will you lock up the house?—and don't forget the kitchen door. [*She turns towards him.*] Good night, Robert. [*No response.*] Good night.

Still no response. With a little shudder she goes

out. He stands lost in thought. But something begins to trouble him. He becomes restless, and the memory of words he has just heard, or the echo of a fairy-tale he once believed, draws him towards the window. Here he listens to the troubling whisper of those grand, passionate, silly things which his philosophy of power has shut out of his life. Then, in a voice grim, cynical, and yet twistful, in accents indefinable, he murmurs—

“And they all lived happy ever afterwards.”

Pause.

Abruptly he draws the curtains.

CURTAIN

When the curtain rises again he is seated at the desk, deep in work. The battle has started—all over again.

THE VICTOR

A MELODRAMA, NEITHER NEW NOR ORIGINAL,
IN ONE ACT

THE VICTOR

A MELODRAMA, NEITHER NEW NOR ORIGINAL,
IN ONE ACT

CHARACTERS

CYRIL BERINGER

JULIAN HAZELTON (his Stepson)

A VISITOR

SCENE.—*The private study of Cyril Beringer, with entrance door BACK CENTRE, and a door RIGHT, leading into a little anteroom where hats and coats are hung up, and where old papers are stowed away.*

Evidence of culture and good taste is apparent in the rows of books and pictures that line the walls, while the soft richness of the carpets and the comfort of the chairs suggest in their owner a sensuous appreciation of luxury and worldly refinement. On the right is a fireplace, sending a quiet glow into the room, which is already darkening with the twilight. A desk is in the centre of the room and a reading lamp with polished reflector, which emits a clear, small arc, and plunges the outer room in darkness. Basking in its light, sunk deep in a leather chair, is Cyril Beringer. He is slender and very tall, even though his shoulders

droop as with weariness. His long face has the pallor of one whose days of health are past, and his fingers hang limply as though his life's force were spent. Only at rare moments do they stiffen and twine with the nervousness of a keen restless mind. His attitude towards life is summed up in the faintly ironical smile that hovers on his lips, and in his suave blase manner, spiced with cynicism.

He sips continually from a decanter and a syphon at his side, and smokes a cigar as though it were a duty not a pleasure.

A knock at the door.

BER. Oh, please come in—please come in!

He half raises himself, a nervous look in his eye. On seeing who it is, he sinks back, relieved, but irritated. Enter Julian Hazelton, a strong young fellow of about nineteen, oppressed with the usual seriousness of that age. It is obvious from his manner that little love is lost between them, and their interview quickly develops into a keen encounter across the desk. Each man tries to turn the lamp on to his opponent, so that now one, now the other, is submitted to its searchlight.

BER. Oh, it's you, Julian—why so formal as to knock?

HAZ. This is your sacred nook, as mother is always impressing on me.

BER. Has your mother gone out?

HAZ. Yes—to some private view of pictures. I thought you got her the tickets?

BER. So I did. Memory—memory!

HAZ. She seemed very distressed about that brother of yours.

BER. Poor John, he is a little troublesome.

HAZ. Does he still blackmail—I mean do you still pay him to keep out of the country?

BER. I sacrifice a trifle of money to prevent my family name from being besmirched with his wild conduct. But I thought you were going out too?

HAZ. It's good of you to offer me the ticket—of course, if you want to get rid of us both——

BER. [*quickly*] Stay by all means.

HAZ. I wish to speak to you, sir.

BER. [*with a shade of irony*] To our mutual delight, I feel sure. But why call me “sir?” You raise a barrier at once.

HAZ. What *am* I to call you?

BER. The old question. I suppose you could not—er—call me “father?”

HAZ. [*frowning*] No—I'm sorry. It sounds false to *him*.

BER. And yet to call me “stepfather” in public rather points the painful distinction—don't you think?

HAZ. Time will solve it.

BER. Ah, time—time! Last resort of the undecided!

HAZ. It will solve our mystery, sir.

BER. “Sir” again! Really, such excessive politeness in a young man generally precedes a request for money.

HAZ. [*curtly*] I have no need of money.

BER. I breathe again.

HAZ. [*with an effort*] I must thank you for the money you've allowed me. I'm in your debt.

BER. Don't let that overshadow your young life.

HAZ. [*grimly*] It may.

BER. H'm, have a drink.

HAZ. I don't drink.

BER. Nor smoke?

HAZ. No.

BER. I weep for you. How do you fill in time? Surely you don't descend to hobbies?

HAZ. I'm well occupied. I've been interviewing the Attorney-General this morning, and the detective that had charge of our case. [*He switches the lamp on to Beringer.*]

BER. Ah, that fellow. I have not seen him since—it happened. I had forgotten him.

HAZ. He has not forgotten *you*. He asked after you.

BER. [*airily*] Then a policeman can be courteous, if not clever!

HAZ. We went over the case together.

BER. After all these years—six, isn't it?

HAZ. He had forgotten nothing.

BER. And you were only thirteen, when——

HAZ. That's just why. When one is playing at soldiers and pirates, and all the world is magic and beautiful with a child's make-believe—and then, suddenly, to be confronted with the murder of your father. My very innocence made it seem all the more mysterious; all the more horrible! Poor father! We were such—such chums. No, one does not forget!

BER. And this detective fellow, has he discovered any clue in all that time?

HAZ. Only suspicions, suspicions! Doubts, torments! But as for proof; scheme and plot how we

may, whatever path we follow, we are blocked by the identity of that Mr. Grimwoode.

BER. Grimwoode—Grimwoode——?

HAZ. The man whom my father went to see on business, the morning of the murder. He had never heard of him before. He went with curiosity, but without suspicion, to some room in the Hotel Imperial. It was there, sometime later—you know—he—he was found. Mr. Grimwoode had vanished.

BER. Naturally.

HAZ. Grimwoode, we know, was a stout, thick-set man. Beyond that he is a mystery—not a trace! Who was he? What had he to do with my father, who never harmed a soul? What were his motives? Not theft, no gold nor watch was taken—what were the motives? Envy, hatred, madness—[*slowly*]
—or was it love and jealousy?

BER. [*philosophically*] Motives are a tangle. One cannot dissect them and label this or that as “envy,” “hate,” or “jeal—” no, men’s motives are a web, sometimes indirect, sometimes trifling, but always baffling—baffling as Destiny. And just as much a mystery to the person himself.

HAZ. The detective suggested “*Cherchez la femme.*”

BER. [*shrugging*] A conventional fellow, evidently. Besides, I thought there were no women in your father’s life.

HAZ. [*hotly*] There were not; at least not with the emphasis you give the word. [*Dropping his voice.*] My mother is a very beautiful woman.

BER. [*softly, sincerely*] Why, yes. Beautiful.

HAZ. [*brutally*] Perhaps that is the reason you married her.

Their eyes meet like swords.

BER. [*rising, coldly*] We won't discuss your mother. There is such a thing as delicacy—even towards a stepfather.

HAZ. I don't breathe a word against her; no one could. But for the moment she is just a pawn in my scheme of action.

BER. And what is that?

HAZ. [*facing him*] To find the murderer.

BER. [*mildly interested*] What would you do?

HAZ. What would *you* do?

BER. When in doubt, refer to the Bible—"Vengeance is mine," saith the Lord.

HAZ. "An eye for an eye." The thought that my father's murderer is at liberty—God, it's a shadow to haunt any man. [*Slowly.*] It's got to be removed.

He lays a revolver on the table.

BER. [*smiling*] A patron of the "pictures," evidently.

HAZ. [*continuing*] When we meet face to face—like you and I now—he'll have to pay me for the life he's taken, and for my life he's poisoned. To make him pay!—that's my mission.

BER. [*amused*] Ah, you have that high determination to be gloomy at all costs, which characterizes the young man with a mission. Quite a modern Hamlet, in fact!

HAZ. The same mission, yes. Hamlet, too, had a stepfather.

BER. But there, of course, the coincidence ends. Hamlet had an obliging ghost to help him; a voice from the grave to direct his suspicions.

HAZ. They're not out of date, yet.

BER. My dear boy, a doctor——!

HAZ. A voice from the grave came to me.

They look at one another long, probingly. Hazelton places a bundle of letters on the table.

BER. What are these?

HAZ. His letters.

BER. [*ironically*] From the grave?

Beringer's eyes are riveted on the letters by that uncanny fascination which repels even while it attracts.

HAZ. Almost. They cover the last year of his life. One—that one—was written the night before his death.

BER. When did you find them?

HAZ. Only a few days ago. After my aunt died—his sister, you know—they were sent to me. They were written by my father to her in fullest confidence.

BER. Very interesting. Any clues?

HAZ. He lays bare his heart. It was being torn because he felt that his wife was slipping from him towards another man. [*Pause.*] Why aren't you jealous to hear the name of this man? Your wife seems to have loved him.

BER. Oh!

HAZ. Perhaps you know.

BER. [*heavily*] Are names mentioned?

HAZ. Oh, yes.

BER. That proves nothing.

HAZ. [*slowly*] Makes one think—makes one think. Perhaps "*Cherchez la femme*" is right after all. The motive, then, was love—blind, unreasoning, most unscrupulous of passions, sweeping out of the way even a dear friend to realize its dream.

BER. I trust your mother, rather than those letters. Do you believe she loved this Grimwoode, the stout, thickset man?

HAZ. Has it never occurred to you that he may have been only an accomplice—the catspaw of a clever, scheming brain that controlled him by reason of some power over him? An erring brother, for instance, eh? I would never trust an accomplice, would *you*?

BER. [*blandly*] I bow to your opinion—the authority, apparently, on criminal matters.

HAZ. Letters probably passed between the two—perhaps the accomplice, the erring brother, is blackmailing even now. I shall find those letters. Proof! Proof!

BER. And then?

HAZ. The settlement. Do you believe in justice?

BER. In God's justice—the rest is transitory——

HAZ. And yet that murderer is free to go about the world, enjoying the life of which he deprived my father, laughing, drinking, smoking! Why doesn't God punish?

BER. [*slowly*] He may, even now, be punishing.

HAZ. With thoughts that haunt, eh? Tell me, I am very like my father to look at?

BER. A certain resemblance.

HAZ. Do you think if I were to thrust my face against the murderer—like this—[*suits action to*

word]—that he would start guiltily as if he had seen a ghost?

BER. [*bitingly*] Try it on your friends. You'll be popular.

HAZ. And if I confronted that accomplice with his false name of "Grimwoode?"

BER. [*calmly*] It depends on his nerve and on his remorse.

HAZ. You believe in remorse?

BER. Yes. You say he is laughing and drinking and smoking. Perhaps. But it may be that when he drinks a face stares up at him and the wine seems blood; when he smokes, what grinning images twist and leer, mocking at him; when he dreams in the stillness of night, what phantoms crush him, till he starts from sleep only to face realities more horrible; and when he thinks—when he thinks——

He sways unsteadily. Hazelton watches him, hungrily.

HAZ. What, are you ill?

BER. Let me sit.

HAZ. Here, drink this. [*Gives whisky.*]

BER. Yes, yes. [*He drinks.*] That's better. [*They look at one another.*] Thanks.

HAZ. What's the cause, do you know?

BER. [*mumbling*] I have not been well.

HAZ. But—for long—what do you mean?

BER. [*looking up*] It's a question of a few months, Julian.

HAZ. With you? I thought—we—no one knew——

BER. [*staying him*] It was better not. The doctors—well, it will be gradual, just a sinking, till—[*Suddenly.*] Don't tell your mother, Julian! I would have ended it all long ago—but for her. Julian, promise me never to pain her—you love her, and her happiness is everything to me and to you—whatever schemes for revenge you have, don't forget that——

HAZ. [*unawed*] You're a clever man.

BER. [*curtly*] It's a question of heart, not brain. No wonder you don't understand. Well, I must have a wash—expecting a visitor——

HAZ. [*quickly*] And mother is out.

BER. Private business.

HAZ. It must be—very—if you wanted us both to go out.

BER. This is my house. The roof you sleep under. You're in my debt, aren't you. [*Smiling.*] Eh? [*No response.*]

HAZ. I must leave you alone with your visitor.

BER. Thanks. [*Coming up to him.*] By the bye, you've said some queer rude things to me to-day. Let it pass. You're only a boy. But some time, soon—when you think it over—you'll be sorry for what you've said, and ashamed, bitterly ashamed, for what you've thought. [*Lightly.*] See you at dinner. Really, I must change my jacket. Never meet a man in *négligé*, Julian—you lose dignity.

Exit into side room. Julian has been thinking hard during the last minute.

HAZ. [*to himself*] I wonder?

Suddenly he makes up his mind to a course of

action. He slips quietly along the wall and, with a spring, slams the door behind Beringer, and then in feverish haste, locks it. He pauses breathing hard. A muffled voice sounds through the closed door. Stooping to the keyhole, he shouts, "I can't hear—what?—oh, just a boy's joke." Tearing a strip from his handkerchief, he stuffs it into the keyhole. He straightens himself, listening intently—footsteps! He examines his revolver carefully and then places himself behind the centre door, so that when it opens he will be hidden from the person entering.

Enter the Visitor, a stout, thickset man, with a faint resemblance to Beringer, but coarser, and bearing the traces of dissipation. He looks round, surprised at finding no one—then wanders to the middle of the room, nonplussed for the moment. Hazleton, from behind the door, covers him with the revolver, and cries, "Mr. Grimwoode!" The effect is electrical. With a spring, half rage, half terror, the man wheels round, crouching low as if expecting an attack. Then, in an awed whisper, he gasps, "Hazelton!"

HAZ. Well—won't you sit down, Mr. Grimwoode?

VIS. That's not my name.

HAZ. You answered to it.

VIS. Naturally, when I heard a voice——

HAZ. A voice that stirred memories, eh?

VIS. Who are you.

HAZ. Hazelton is my name. You knew my father.

VIS. What do you want?

HAZ. To settle with you. You killed my father—don't lie, it's not worth it! You answered just now to

the name of the murderer, and when you saw me, you thought it was the ghost of the man you killed.

VIS. My brother gave me away, did he?

HAZ. No. I guessed if he wanted any dirty work done he'd bribe the black sheep of the family——

VIS. Aren't you personal?

HAZ. This—[*taps revolver*—]—is my privilege.

VIS. Shoot away, then!

HAZ. I'm not going to shoot.

VIS. Oh!

HAZ. [*harshly*] But I will if—sit down!

VIS. What's the game?

HAZ. Wait. Before the murder, you were living in America. My stepfather must have written to you about the scheme. Is that so?

VIS. Course it is.

HAZ. I want those letters.

VIS. [*grimly*] Do you think I'm going to put the proof into your hands to give to the police!

HAZ. Oh, it's not *you* I'm after. If I'd meant to have you arrested I should have had two policemen here; if I'd meant to shoot you, I should have done it long ago.

VIS. H'm! Well?

HAZ. For the last six years you've been blackmailing your brother by means of those letters.

VIS. How could I, when they involve me?

HAZ. You've been stabbing him in his one tender spot—his love for my—for his wife. You've been threatening to show her those letters. You're not going to spoil her happiness. I offer you a hundred

pounds for those letters—a fair bargain—no mean advantage.

VIS. And if I don't?

HAZ. There is my "privilege." [*taps revolver.*]

VIS. What will you do to my brother?

At that moment a muffled voice sounds from behind the locked door, and fists beat against the wood.

VIS. [*startled*] What? A man in there! [*Hazelton nods.*] My brother? [*Again Hazelton nods.*] Great God! Like a beast in a trap!

HAZ. [*curtly*] Very like.

VIS. Revenge, is it?

HAZ. Never mind him. My offer.

VIS [*bitterly*] A fair bargain! [*Takes letters from his pocket.*]

HAZ. Don't come near. Put them on that table.

The man obeys. Hazelton picks them up.

HAZ. His writing, sure enough! Proof, proof! There's your money, Mr.—er—Grimwoode, and there's the door—I'll watch you off the premises.

The beating on the door recommences.

VIS. [*whispering*] You—you won't kill him?

HAZ. That's my business.

The visitor goes. Hazelton steps outside and waits till the hall-door slams. Then he returns, thrusting the letters into his pocket. He examines the revolver and unlocks the door. Pause. Enter Beringer, pale and nervous.

BER. [*with assumed indignation*] Well, young man!

HAZ. [*blandly*] I have entertained your visitor.

BER. In my house—locking me up like a child——!

HAZ. [*impatiently*] Oh, sit down, sit down.

BER. You've learnt manners from my visitor.

HAZ. Isn't it time to take off the mask?

BER. For you it is. What's this tomfoolery?

HAZ. [*quietly*] It was foolery on your part to trust an accomplice. My theory was correct.

BER. Theory! You are all theory!

HAZ. I was—now I know.

BER. [*airily*] Youth always *knows*.

HAZ. The man who just left here was your brother—that I know. And your brother was the mysterious Mr. Grimwoode—that I know.

BER. My brother—you don't—poor brother—my God!

HAZ. [*ironic*] How beautiful—this contrition for your fallen brother!

BER. One of our family!

HAZ. Drop your mask. I have found out the truth—before, I only suspected—now I know. It was you—it was your brain behind the murder, scheming in safety—those letters of my father were correct when they said you had stolen my mother's love—love! so beautiful, so pure, that you could kill your friend to attain it——

BER. Julian, listen, listen—you're mad with suspicion, with that man's lies. It's my word against his——!

HAZ. Indeed! [*Produces letters taken from visitor.*]

BER. [*controlling himself*] Letters—yes—well?

HAZ. It's all there, black and white, fact and proof.

BER. Ah, so he added forgery, did he, to his other accomplishments?

HAZ. I got them from him on the spur of the moment—he had no knowledge that he would meet me.

Silence. Hazelton goes quietly to the centre door and locks it. The click of the key seems to bring home to Beringer the reality of his position, chilling him with a sense of doom. His nerve deserts him. He breaks down.

BER. Julian, you mustn't kill me—listen—just one moment—you don't realize—it's your mother——

HAZ. What of her?

BER. I told you I had only a few months to live—I'm not afraid to die—

HAZ. It's as well.

BER. But I cling to those few months of life—and you don't know what I've suffered—just so as to be with her to the last—not to lose a week, a day, an hour. It is for her happiness—you can't steal that, Julian, from your own mother——!

HAZ. My father, what of him?

BER. I can understand.

HAZ. [*wincing*] Don't say that.

BER. He's gone from her life—I'm her happiness.

HAZ. You! What *are* you?

BER. A murderer, if you will. A murderer can be loved; she loves me and I love her—you *must* believe that.

HAZ. [*seriously*] Yes, I believe that.

BER. If you part us, you break her heart. Let her have the happiness and joy of life while she can.

HAZ. And what of the joy of life of the man you killed? Doesn't his voice cry out for payment—demanding the happiness you stole from him? Besides, where would my happiness be, my peace of mind, if I let you go?

BER. That's it—egotism, egotism—you think of yourself only. You would wreck your mother's life. Can't you see the look in her eyes, dull, joyless? I see it.

HAZ. The dead have their claims.

BER. Against the living, against flesh and blood! The dead have their claims—yes—[*strongly*—and their triumphs! You think that when you kill me that's the end—that your conscience will be untroubled. [*Lowering his voice.*] I killed a man, and thought to live and love untroubled. But every time I laughed, every enjoyment I had, put me in his debt. That debt was a chain around me. If you kill me—you release me—then you carry my debt. It will crush the joy out of your life. The dead have their triumphs!

HAZ. No doubt, no doubt. I give you two minutes to do away with yourself.

BER. How?

HAZ. You have drugs here, I know. Two minutes.

BER. [*laughing*] And leave you with those letters. You'll show them to my wife. If you burn them so that she can never learn the truth about me——

HAZ. If I do?

BER. I keep the bargain.

Hazelton looks at him keenly, then burns the letters.

BER. [*sighing*] Ah, that stain is gone. You can't injure me in her eyes now.

HAZ. The bargain!

BER. Not with you. My bargain is with her. For her sake I mean to live as long——

HAZ. As I choose.

BER. [*deeply*] Longer, much longer.

HAZ. I give you a last chance.

BER. [*gaily*] Do you think I will be so considerate as to take the blood off your hands? Oh, no. You're going to carry my debt now. [*Calmly.*] Let me see, I will stand here, so that I fall within the warmth of the fire. Now!

HAZ. You must be mad.

BER. Nay, nay. One cannot choose the manner of one's birth, let me at least plan my exit.

HAZ. You smile now—thank God I shan't have to watch you smiling through life any more.

BER. Come, end it. Before vulgarity intervenes.

HAZ. [*softly*] You killed my father.

BER. I did. And I count the toy I won worth all eternity. [*Tauntingly.*] She loves me, Julian.

HAZ. You think——

BER. It is I who *know* this time. Would I have suffered as I have? Oh, you can't kill me, I shall live on in her heart more than ever your father——

A shot rings out. Beringer sways unsteadily and tries to speak. But he cannot. Staggering to the desk, he seizes a pen and scribbles a line on a piece of

paper. He straightens himself, then crashes to the floor, the paper in his hand. For a moment Hazelton stands rooted, then turns the lamp on to the dead man.

HAZ. You see, father, it is done.

He approaches the body and extracts the paper from the grasp of the dead hands. He reads aloud. "I could suffer no more—my health—I ended it. Forgive me, dear wife. Love me. C.B."

HAZ. [*Awed*] You did love her. But now—I—I have killed a man, just as you—my God, they mustn't catch me! What shall I do?—this paper—ah, yes—that proves suicide, doesn't it—you've saved me—[*He laughs, then stops.*] You're smiling—why—why—because you saved my life, because I am in your debt. But I shan't be—I'll die first—I'll burn your favour, see? But that would mean "murder"—and—and all the truth in evidence—and mother, she must never know, it's her happiness—you said it. No, I must live. [*Replaces paper.*] And I shall owe every breath to you—is that why your smile? I could tear that smile away with my fingers, you——! [*Whispering.*] The dead have their triumphs!

He slinks from the room. The dead man lies in the fire light, his face ruddy in its glow, his lips still curled in their faintly ironic way. He is smiling to himself.

END.

ANCHORED

A DRAMATIC INCIDENT IN A COLLEGE

ANCHORED

A DRAMATIC INCIDENT IN A COLLEGE

CHARACTERS

EDWIN (A Medical Student)

CLIVE (A Medical Student)

FREDDIE (A Law Student)

SAM (An Engineering Student)

CHARLIE (A Divinity Student)

THE COLLEGE PORTER

MARGARET DURANT (An Art Student)

SCENE

From the actor's standpoint throughout.

It is Edwin's room at college. The only entrance is a door—BACK CENTRE—which opens on to a corridor; fireplace and mantelpiece, RIGHT. Across the entire LEFT SIDE of the stage curtains are drawn. They separate Edwin's bed, dressing table, etc., from the rest of the room. When the curtains are drawn, nothing of them can be seen.

In the centre of the room, placed perpendicularly to the footlights, is a heavy oblong desk with numerous drawers. It is strewn with magazines, novels, a

microscope, a reading lamp; while standing at the corner is a silver-framed photo of a girl, and in the centre a tobacco jar. Nailed to the wall on the right of the door is a book-case, laden partly with ominous-looking text-books, and partly with cheap editions of the Poets. On the mantelpiece are half-a-dozen silver mugs—evidently sporting prizes, a skull and a large unframed photo of the same girl who adorns the desk. A tin of cigarettes peeps from behind the photo.

On the extreme right of the stage, close to the foot-lights, is a small round table on which stands a kettle. Drawn up before the fire is the only arm-chair, and even this has a dissipated tilt to one side. The other chairs that are scattered about are plain and uncushioned. The pictures on the walls are chiefly sporting groups, enlivened with an occasional actress. Hanging behind the door are a blazer, a tattered academical gown and a yet more dissipated umbrella. In the place of a coal-scuttle there is an effective but unattractive kerosene tin. The carpet, wallpaper and curtains reveal an unusually subdued and refined taste for an undergraduate.

It is four o'clock in the afternoon and the fire is burning. When the curtain rises the room is empty.

A knock is heard at the door—pause—then a second knock. Enter Freddie, whistling. He wears tennis trousers and white shoes, but no socks; the remnants of a blazer, consisting chiefly of one sleeve and a number of saving shreds, contrast vividly with a "loud" soft collar, and a smart bow tie. He is the professional jester of the college and has the dubious

reputation of being one of the few men who can be consistently and purposely absurd both in word and action for any length of time. An inveterate "Poseur," he especially plumes himself—with youthful exaggeration—on his success in the part of "man-about-town." In his hand is an unfilled pipe. He pauses a moment on the threshold, then advances, still whistling, to the tobacco jar, opens it, and on finding it empty, his whistling sinks to a groan of despair. He looks around, and his eye lights on the cigarette box on the mantelpiece. The whistle rises to a trill of exultation, he takes a cigarette, lights it carefully, replaces the box out of sight, spreads himself in the arm-chair, and cocks his feet on the mantelpiece. Knock at the door—he continues smoking. Louder knock—he calls airily—"Come in! Come in! Don't be polite or afraid."

Enter Sam, also with a pipe in his hand. He wears a sweater and a thick green muffler. In features he is heavy and rather sulky, while his manner is surly and morose. He stutters perceptibly.

SAM. Hullo, F-Freddie!

FRED. Hail, Sam! [*Sam advances to the tobacco jar, opens it, and snorts in disgust*]

SAM. W-where's the o-owner?

FRED. I don't know, and I'm so comfortable that I don't care.

SAM. [*peremptorily*] C-cigarette, p-please!

FRED. [*sweetly*] My last; awfully sorry!

SAM. [*growling*] There's not a c-cigarette in the c-college; damned d-disgrace!

FRED. Knowing your thorough nature, I presume that you have ransacked every room?

SAM. C-certainly. [*Sets himself on desk.*] I shall be f-forced to use my own tobacco; more h-humiliation! [*Lights a corn-cob pipe. Sternly*] Where w-were you last night? On the s-sprees?

FRED. Please don't be vulgar.

SAM. Young man, you w-were d-drunk.

FRED. Drunk, indeed; kindly don't use that word in my presence; it is only applied to the lower classes.

SAM. You're full of v-vices. [*Rises and sits left; he proceeds to read a magazine.*]

FRED. [*airily*] Vice, with some people, is a recreation; with me it is a religion.

SAM. B-bosh and shut u-up!

FRED. [*talking like lightning*] Shut up, indeed; what next. You'll be asking me to behave like a gentleman soon, and what a cruel humiliation that would be for a spirited Undergrad.

SAM. What the d-devil do you m-mean?

FRED. [*with a sweeping gesture*] Anything, everything—except what I say. [*Knock at door. Rising.*] Step right in, please; scrape your feet on the mat—if there is one.

Enter Charlie, also with a pipe in his hand. He is dressed in a grey dressing-gown and red bath slippers. His features and face are of the round cherubic variety that are indicative of an equanimity which is never ruffled, and a good-humour that not even Freddie can disturb. Though not in voice or manner the conventional cleric, he has a habit of wisely wag-

ging his head and speaking in impressive whispers which are prophetic of the future parson. He treats his more flighty companions in a fatherly tolerant manner. He stands on the threshold.

FRED. [*declaiming*] Behold the Reverend Charlie breathing morals and somebody else's tobacco!

CHARLIE. Ah, tobacco; now that's just what I'm looking for. [*Opens jar on desk.*] H'm. [*to Fred., insinuatingly*] Of course, Fred., if it should occur to you to offer me—or—or—a cigarette. [*Moves to mantelpiece.*]

FRED. I feel instinctively that such an idea will never—cross my mind. [*Sits next desk.*]

SAM. F-Fred., shut u-up. C-Charlie, have y-you just c-come from the University?

CHARLIE. Yes.

SAM. Any exam. r-results p-published yet?

CHARLIE. None yet, but they are expected any minute.

FRED. The results ought to have been out two days ago.

CHARLIE. I saw Edwin nervously prowling about.

FRED. He seems extraordinarily worried and anxious about this exam. I can't understand such vulgar impatience.

CHARLIE. [*to Fred.*] Fortunately young man we are not all as idle as you are. Edwin has set himself to win this Scholarship and, if you ask me, I think it has got on his mind.

SAM. B-bosh! There's a w-woman in the c-case!

Charlie pricks up his ears.

FRED. And quite right, too. For a medical student to go through his course without getting engaged to a nurse is downright carelessness. You think that Edwin is in love; I know it. [*In true legal manner*] Why do I know? [*Sits on desk and swings his legs.*] Because when an Undergrad. suddenly commences to behave like a rational human being, there is something radically wrong, and that "something" is either money or a girl.

SAM. P-precisely.

FRED. Now a girl always means money, and for some men, money means simply girls.

CHARLIE. [*reprovingly*] Fred., Fred.—your sentiments are atrocious.

FRED. It's not sentiment; it's experience.

CHARLIE. [*sternly*] Well, sir, those are the kind of experiences a gentleman would keep to himself.

FRED. [*haughtily*] I'm not a gentleman.

CHARLIE. Of course, I don't wish to gossip; but is that a photo of a nurse? [*indicating photo on desk.*]

FRED. That's Margaret Durant. She is doing a post-graduate course in English. Why do you ask?

CHARLIE. Because about four months ago I remember that Edwin seemed rather keen on her.

FRED. Well?

CHARLIE. Wait, wait, my boy; don't you know, or haven't you seen that quite recently Clive has been piloting Miss Durant to matches and tea parties, and generally haunting her society?

FRED. H'm. Is that so?

CHARLIE. [*pompously*] Now, as you know, Edwin and Clive aren't too friendly; but the mere fact that

they are running neck and neck for the scholarship—the racing simile is not my own—would not—er—separate them.

SAM. Au c-contre. *aire*.

CHARLIE. [*sinking his voice to an impressive whisper*] Then it must be a woman.

SAM. Q.E.D-D.

CHARLIE. Now, Fred., what do you think of that, my boy? Is that logic, or is it not, eh? [*Approaches Fred.*]

FRED. It may be logic, but it's not commonsense.

CHARLIE. Indeed, well, if you ask me——

FRED. My dear Charlie, four months ago I knew Edwin better probably than anyone. But since then he has become——

CHARLIE. Well?

FRED. A mystery. [*Goes to mantelpiece.*]

CHARLIE. And haven't I just solved it this minute?

FRED. [*shortly*] No! You've merely found the obvious explanation, which is always wrong. There is something more behind this estrangement between Edwin and Clive than meets the eye; mark the words of a lawyer!

CHARLIE. H'm. Well, I feel it my duty to tackle Edwin on the subject.

FRED. I wouldn't if I were you; he's very touchy.

CHARLIE. That's all very well, but I have to keep a fatherly eye on the college.

FRED. He ought to be here any minute now if he was only wandering around the notice board when you saw him.

CHARLIE. He certainly deserves that scholarship.

but if you ask me I don't think he would have won it if Clive hadn't lost that elaborate synopsis of his.

FRED. [*quickly*] Ah, the synopsis; yes, that was jolly hard luck for old Clive.

CHARLIE. It served him right for frittering his time away over a flash, brilliant piece of work, when he ought to have been plodding, like Edwin, along the beaten track.

FRED. Most remarkable—what people manage to lose here—everything from money to morals. [*Waxing eloquent.*] Those charwomen are at the bottom of it—all women are addicted to a tyrannical habit called “tidying up.” As far as I can see, this consists in the destruction of anything a man particularly values, and the careful concealment of everything he is certain to want, and when it's too late up pops the missing article. Those women were around here—when was it? Yesterday. It's little short of supernatural the number of things that get lost in this place.

SAM. Or s-stolen.

FRED. Oh, the synopsis is not stolen. There is not a man here capable of such a thing.

SAM. There are v-very few things a m-man *can't* do.

CHARLIE. Ah, but there are a lot that a *gentleman wouldn't*.

FRED. Charlie, you've hit the nail on the head; that's the first time you've done it in three years. [*Mock serious.*] Be careful, sir, or you will be getting a reputation for originality, and that would ruin you at the 'Varsity.

SAM. [*reading a cheap magazine*] How can I get c-culture with that f-fool babbling?

FRED. Whoa, there—steady, Sam.

SAM. [*very dignified*] Mister Sam to you, young f-fellow.

FRED. [*taking cigarette box from behind photo and holding it teasingly before Sam.*] Well, Mr. Sam couldn't find a cigarette in spite of his unscrupulous reconnoitre.

SAM. [*angrily*] You d-damned s-s-scoundrel.

FRED. [*suavely*] Do be calm, Sam, darling, or you may insult me.

SAM. [*spluttering with rage*] Y-you l-look out. I've had enough of y-your b-b-beastly b-bantering.

FRED. [*strokes Sam's hair*] Diddums, diddums— isn't it a bright merry little sunbeam.

SAM. [*with a roar*] H-hell! [*He leaps up, seizes his chair, and rushes at Fred. The latter nimbly dodges and, darting to the door, grabs the umbrella hanging there. They now track one another round the centre desk with grim determination. Charlie stands up on his chair to get out of danger.*]

FRED. Come on, Sunbeam.

They thrust wildly at one another. The door suddenly opens and Edwin stands on the threshold. On seeing him the combatants assume attitudes of dreamy innocence, gazing at the ceiling. Edwin watches them, much amused. He is dressed neatly, but not smartly. His hair is fair and inclined to be wavy; his features interesting and refined. Moody and excitable, he has a touch of the artistic temperament, and is not free from the neurotic strain that often attends it. His aversion to practical realities

results in a lack of concentration. This is a weakness of which he is sensitively conscious, and his lofty, superior utterances are often only a cloak to hide it. He hangs up his hat.

EDWIN. [*smiling*] Make yourselves at home, won't you?

FRED. [*blandly*] Thank you—things are getting rather uncomfortable. [*He sits in the arm-chair; Sam on the left, Charlie at the desk. Edwin wanders restlessly in the background.*]

CHARLIE. [*clearing his throat and spreading himself importantly*] H'm! We were just talking about you, Edwin.

EDWIN. [*sharply*] What were you saying?

CHARLIE. We were considering your chances for the scholarship.

EDWIN. [*irritably*] Exams., exams., always exams.; they are driving me mad.

SAM. That's what we t-thought.

EDWIN. [*fiercely*] I don't care a tinker's curse for any exams.

CHARLIE. [*tentatively*] Or any girls either, eh?

EDWIN. [*raising his eyebrows*] Why these skilful innuendoes?

CHARLIE. Well, you have been so irritable lately, that I was beginning to think——

EDWIN. [*sharply*] You must have been very seriously troubled to take such a drastic step.

Uncomfortable pause.

EDWIN. [*good-humouredly*] Well, after all a man

has some cause to be irritable when he has to stand up in his *own* room. It's gloriously absurd!

FRED. [*in an injured tone*] Edwin, please don't laugh at the absurd. It's far too sacred

EDWIN. [*turning to the door*] You're welcome; this place is getting on my nerves.

CHARLIE. [*conciliatory*] Yes, yes—if you ask me, I think these exams. have got on everybody's minds.

EDWIN. [*turning back swiftly*] Exams., again. Great Heavens, does your mind never soar above the interests of the moment? You are always reminding us of the few things we never forget. You're a prophet of the commonplace.

FRED. His profession demands that he should be.

EDWIN. Well, Charlie, if you want to practise your profession, you had better start with me. I am speedily becoming a rank atheist.

CHARLIE. Good gracious! What's the cause of that?

EDWIN. Five years of compulsory chapels.

SAM. [*clearing his throat*] That r-reminds me about t-that p-petition I am getting u-up.

FRED. What? To abolish compulsory chapels?

SAM. Yes; the w-whole c-college will s-sign it.

CHARLIE. I shan't.

SAM. Shut u-up. I s-spent l-last n-night thinking of a n-name for it, and I d-decided to call it——

FRED. Well?

SAM. "The Liberty of the S-Soul B-Bill; or, The Anti-C-Chapel Act."

FRED. When shall we sign?

SAM. This afternoon after the r-results are out.

EDWIN. Why after the results?

SAM. [*with immense cunning*] Ah, he; w-wait and s-see my s-scheme.

CHARLIE. [*indignant*] Well, I've held my tongue long enough——

FRED. Impossible.

CHARLIE. [*to Fred.*] Oh, you pretend to be very smart—let me tell you that you are not clever enough to be rude. As to those Chapels—if they are nothing else, they are excellent discipline.

EDWIN. [*bursting in*] Discipline! Yes, that's it—that is our 'Varsity. It begins by cramming your head with lectures for fear of your becoming intellectual; it crams your soul with chapels for fear of your becoming religious—it ends by emptying both. Discipline—schoolroom routine—system—the only real faculty we have is the business faculty. [*He swings round furiously and faces the room.*]

CHARLIE. [*sagely*] Ah, it's very easy to be abusive, but if you ask me, I think when you find the Professors have awarded you the scholarship, your attitude towards them will change considerably.

EDWIN. [*frowning*] Scholarship again; why always harping on unpleasant subjects?

CHARLIE. [*innocently*] Is it unpleasant?

FRED. I bet it's unpleasant to Clive.

EDWIN. Why—to Clive?

FRED. Well, the loss of his synopsis took all the heart out of him.

EDWIN. [*pause*] I am sorry if I lashed out too violently just now.

CHARLIE. [*soothingly*] Yes, yes, we understand; and I hope you won't think me inquisitive for asking

you questions about this lady [*indicating photo*]. To tell you the truth I was merely interested in her because I have seen her about so much lately with one of our fellows.

EDWIN. [*yawning*] Well, it's a free country.

CHARLIE. Quite so; but I couldn't help wondering what a loss of valuable time that gadding about must have meant to Clive.

EDWIN. [*stiffening*] Clive!

CHARLIE. Ah, you see, I knew you would be interested.

EDWIN. [*curtly*] It has nothing to do with me.

CHARLIE. [*knowingly*] We quite understand.

EDWIN. [*flaring up*] You understand; understand lectures, understand yourselves, but anything of importance—never. [*Exit, slamming door.*]

Pause of perplexity.

SAM. [*laconically*] P-put him to b-bed.

FRED. Give him a whisky.

CHARLIE. Leave him alone; it's only one of his moods.

FRED. One of his moods! I believe he makes a hobby of them; treats them as playthings.

CHARLIE. If he's not careful *they* will treat *him* as a plaything.

FRED. [*rising*] 'Pon my word you've hit the nail again. Twice in one afternoon is far too often for a parson.

CHARLIE. Fred, I am not the least impressed by anything you say.

FRED. [*sadly*] Neither am I. [*Kindly.*] H'm! I

think I'll go and have a yarn to old Edwin, or give him a drink. That will revive him.

CHARLIE. I think, perhaps, it would be as well if you put on some respectable clothes.

FRED. My dear chap. I simply loathe feeling respectable, and I can't bear to look it. [*Exit.*]

CHARLIE. [*garrulously*] Ah, the tone of the college is degenerating. [*Strolls to fireplace.*] Here is Freddie, who prides himself on being a roue; there is Edwin, who seems to have taken leave of his senses; and, finally, there is Clive, who is growing more self-centred every day—and he is proud of it, too. I don't know what the college can be coming to—I don't really.

SAM. B-bosh! You're an old w-woman!

CHARLIE. [*rattling on*] Ah, it's all very well for you, my young man. But I have to keep an eye on the reputation of the college. If there wasn't one sane, respectable person among you, who can find out what is amiss and set it straight, why you would all be following Fred to perdition. Now, take Clive's case: four months ago he was immersed in work on his synopsis; he loses the blessed thing, and flies for consolation to this young lady [*pointing to photo*]. If you ask me, I think these women ought never to be allowed within sight of the 'Varsity; for what do they do? Set themselves to ensnare students and stir up jealousy like this between Edwin and Clive.

SAM. How do you k-know that it is j-jealousy?

CHARLIE. How do I know? I have got eyes and brains——

SAM. You s-surprise me.

CHARLIE. I tell you that I have never seen Edwin

and Clive exchange words—and I don't believe Clive would come into this room if you paid him. [*Knock at the door.*] Come in. [*Enter Clive.*]

Clive is a thick-set man, dressed in an ordinary dark suit with double-breasted coat; his face is square and determined, the face of a man who goes his own way irrespective of the interests of others. His gestures are few but very emphatic. He speaks in a measured, incisive voice. Under his arm is a newspaper. He pauses on the threshold.

CHARLIE. [*taken back*] Good heavens, Clive, what brings you here?

SAM. Well, I'm d-damned!

CLIVE. [*coldly*] Why all this consternation?

CHARLIE. Well, Clive, I had never seen you in here before, and——

CLIVE. [*curtly*] Possibly not—I have not been here for some time. Where is the owner? [*Sits at desk.*]

CHARLIE. You have only just missed him. He went down the corridor about three minutes ago with Freddie, who means to give him a drink—which he seems to think a panacea for all ills.

CLIVE. [*without great interest*] What is wrong with Edwin?

CHARLIE. A girl—I am afraid.

CLIVE. Indeed!

CHARLIE. He's got two photos of her, as you see.

CLIVE. [*examining photo with interest*] What an excellent photo!

CHARLIE. You certainly are the best judge as to that.

CLIVE. [*witheringly*] Really now. [*Sits centre.*]

CHARLIE. If you care to leave a message for Edwin——

CLIVE. [*curtly*] Thanks, I can spare a moment to wait for him myself. [*Pause.*]

SAM. Any exam. r-results yet, C-Clive?

CLIVE. Not yet.

CHARLIE. Are there no results for the Arts men?

CLIVE. I tell you there are none.

SAM. [*not listening*] C-Clive!

CLIVE. Hullo!

SAM. D-do you think I will p-pass my exam.?

CLIVE. [*bluntly*] No.

CHARLIE. [*reprovingly*] Oh, Clive, even if you do mean those sort of things you should not say them.

CLIVE. Pooh! That's an old-fashioned idea. Say what you mean, do what you like, and be damned to sentiment—that's my motto.

CHARLIE. Tut, tut, I am afraid the exams. have got on everyone's nerves. What do you fancy about your chances for the scholarship, Clive? [*Approaches Clive.*]

CLIVE. [*emphatically*] I am certain that I shan't get it.

CHARLIE. On account of the lost synopsis?

CLIVE. Very largely.

CHARLIE. You don't seem distressed.

CLIVE. I found other interests. [*He rises and examines the girl's photo on the mantelpiece.*] H'm. I like this photo better than the other—it is side face, and that always reveals the *strength* of a character. [*Knock at door.*] Come in.

Enter Porter, in a white coat, carrying a large bundle of papers. He speaks in a gush of breathlessness.

PORTER. [*going to Clive*] Ah, sir, there you are; I've been searching for you everywhere.

CLIVE. Do you want me?

PORTER. Excuse me, sir, but I was having a look at the rubbish cleared away by the charwoman, and I thought I recognised this bundle as yours, sir; it had your name on the corner. [*Gives it to Clive.*]

CLIVE. It's the synopsis.

PORTER. That's precisely what I thought, sir, if you'll excuse me, sir; so immediately, sir, without delay, though I was busy at the time, and although the telephone was ringing hard, I paid no attention to it, but came looking for you, sir, not daring to entrust them to anyone else, knowing as I do, how easy things get mislaid here, sir; I hope, sir—as how—[*Clive tips him. Exit porter.*]

CLIVE. Well, if that isn't irony with a vengeance. [*Centre.*]

CHARLIE. And, it's just too late—well I never.

CLIVE. It's very dirty. [*Opens papers and looks at them.*] Hello! I don't remember writing that, or that either—besides it's not my writing. [*Excitedly.*] There are notes in the margin—additions—comments—[*Sam and Charlie close round.*]

CHARLIE. You must have forgotten doing them.

CLIVE. But it's not my handwriting; it's a strange writing——

CHARLIE. Now I wonder how that got there?

CLIVE. It seems to me that someone has been using these notes for the exam.

CHARLIE. It's unthinkable.

SAM. There are very few things a man can't do.

CHARLIE. If you ask me, the whole matter turns on the handwriting.

CLIVE. [*obviously*] Sam, can you recognise it?

SAM. [*drawing back*] I'd r-rather not.

CLIVE. What about Charlie?

CHARLIE. Well, it's most unpleasant, but I feel that someone ought to look after it—so——

CLIVE. [*shutting the papers*] Then I will.

CHARLIE. You recognise the writing?

CLIVE. Not yet. It's surprisingly difficult to identify a stray specimen of handwriting, especially when it is so hasty. [*Moves to door.*]

CHARLIE. Still, if you once see another specimen by the same man——

CLIVE. Exactly—if the man is in college, it is only a question of time. If the worst comes to the worst, I can pin a sheet of it on the board and ask anyone, who can, to identify it.

CHARLIE. Now, if you ask me——

CLIVE. I don't. [*Exit.*]

CHARLIE. What hateful unpleasantness. Fancy such a think happening at college—and while I am here, too. Ah, say what you like, the tone of the old place is sinking.

SAM. B-bosh! Let's go and w-watch for the r-results.

CHARLIE. I suppose there will be some sort of celebration—I can't understand why successes should

always be followed by excesses. The winner will "shout" or be "shouted" drinks——

SAM. G-Gee! I forgot that. [*Leaps up and goes out.*]

CHARLIE. [*following, and shaking his head*] In a serious complication like this, if they had only asked me. [*Exit, talking. He and Sam turn to the right on crossing the threshold. The room remains vacant for a moment, then enter Edwin from the left, carrying a parcel, which he places on the table. He arranges the ornaments on the mantelpiece, carefully dusting the photo. He glances nervously at his watch, then walks restlessly across room and goes behind curtains; they close after him.*]

Enter Freddie, who, after peeping round, makes straight for the box of cigarettes.

EDWIN. [*from behind curtains*] Anyone want me?

FRED. Hullo, I must have missed you. I just looked in to see if there was a cigarette here you could lend me.

EDWIN. [*appears at the curtains brushing his hair*] There is a box of them somewhere; found them?

FRED. Instinctively.

EDWIN. [*replacing the brushes and stepping into the room*] If you ever want them again, they are always there for you. Sit down, Fred.

FRED. Thanks. [*Pointing to parcel.*] Tea-party this afternoon?

EDWIN. Yes, that's a cake.

FRED. [*drawling*] Any chaperon?

EDWIN. I regard chaperons as an insult to a decent girl.

FRED. They are; besides being a damned nuisance. Ahem, may I ask who the guest is?

EDWIN. Miss Durant. [*Leans against desk.*]

FRED. Oh, Ho!

EDWIN. Why that peculiar noise?

FRED. I was surprised because it's ages since I've seen you with her.

EDWIN. It is—over two months now; but this is a long-standing engagement. She promised to come and have tea on the day the results were going to be published. She ought to be here any minute.

FRED. She has probably forgotten all about it.

EDWIN. She never forgets her engagements.

FRED. What a strange girl!

EDWIN. She has every reason to remember.

FRED. Indeed.

EDWIN. [*slowly*] If I get that scholarship, we can consider ourselves engaged.

FRED. [*pleased*] Congratulations! [*Rises, and shakes his head—then gloomily*] I was always afraid you'd do it. [*Lightly.*] So everything depends on the exam.—Why on the exam.?

EDWIN. It will help to smooth things over with her family. You see I have to make my own way in the world, and they want some proof that I can make it. Besides, Margaret stipulated on the scholarship so as to spur my ambitions.

FRED. So this exam. is an even more anxious affair for you than I thought. Still, I am sure you anticipate the result without any uneasiness. [*Sits arm-chair.*]

EDWIN. Perhaps. I waver between my ambitions to win it and my dread of the consequences if I do!

FRED. Why all this mystery?

EDWIN. [*jerkily*] You remember that synopsis of Clive's?

FRED. The one that was lost?

EDWIN. What would you say if I told you it had been stolen?

FRED. Please don't be melodramatic. Such a thing has never occurred before.

EDWIN. It's not impossible.

FRED. No one would trouble to do anything nowadays unless it were quite impossible.

EDWIN. What would you think about the man who did steal it?

FRED. I wouldn't think about him at all. Charity would prevent me.

EDWIN. Yet the idea of doing it might easily sneak into a man's mind and gradually get the better of him till he couldn't help himself.

FRED. If you pursue this morbid strain I shall shout for help.

EDWIN. [*strongly*] It's a fact.

FRED. [*serious*] Straight?

Edwin nods.

FRED. Who told you?

EDWIN. I didn't need to be told.

FRED. You actually know who did it?

EDWIN. [*slowly*] Don't you?

Edwin and Fred. look at one another. Fred. lowers his eyes. Pause.

FRED. You!

EDWIN. Yes—stole it—used it for this exam.

FRED. What a rotten thing to do!

EDWIN. [*motionless*] Go on! Go on! I've heard all this abuse before.

FRED. From whom?

EDWIN. Myself!

FRED. [*moving to the door*] So all this time you have been rubbing shoulders with us just the same.

EDWIN. [*savagely*] Then I am an outcast, am I? I had thought that you, at least, would not set up as judge, and in cold blood proceed to criticise emotions you have never experienced, and I don't think you understand.

FRED. [*repeating*] Emotions—never experienced—never understand—[*He hesitates, then turns from the door and goes to the fireplace.*] I spoke hastily—it was the instinct of the moment.

EDWIN. [*bitterly*] I know that instinct well. [*Looking up quaintly at Fred.*] Aren't you going to say you are sorry for me?

FRED. No!

EDWIN. Good!

FRED. But what could have possessed you?

EDWIN. A mood.

FRED. But why—when you were more yourself—didn't you return it?

EDWIN. [*laughing moodily*] Because I realised—as is generally the case—that what is almost comically easy to do one minute, is tragically difficult to undo the next. [*Miserably.*] What a hash—what a pitiful hash I've made of things!

FRED. Come, it may not be as bad as you think.

EDWIN. [*torturing himself*] Don't try to soften it—or excuse it. Face the facts. [*Half to himself.*] Of course, when you *do* think about it—better men probably than any of us have been sent down from college for worse acts than mine.

FRED. That doesn't alter yours.

EDWIN. Er—no.

Pause.

FRED. Where is this synopsis? [*Moves and leans over the desk.*]

EDWIN. [*taking the keys from his pocket and going to drawers*] In this drawer—h'm, that's queer—the drawer isn't locked—not here—it must be here—all open! Drawers all tidied—let me think—can I have? Great Heavens, I must have left the papers lying about when I went away—forgot to lock—they are gone right enough [*rushes to bookcase and behind curtains*]—Not here, not here. For God's sake, man, help me look.

FRED. [*calmly*] What can it possibly matter if they are lost now—so long as they weren't actually found in your room?

EDWIN. [*sitting down, relieved*] Of course—of course—It doesn't matter if they are thrown away—or if anyone finds them; for who is to know? [*His face becomes rigid.*] God, what a fool. I've scribbled on them—wrote notes and additions of my own. If they are found—the handwriting is recognised. [*bitterly.*] Well, that takes the result out of my hands.

FRED. But they may be destroyed—cleared away by those women.

EDWIN. [*dazedly*] They may even now be in Clive's hands.

FRED. There's just a chance he won't recognise the writing. You've never had much to do with him—especially in the last few months.

EDWIN. Naturally—after what I had done. But he has only to show the writing round the college and someone will indentify it.

FRED. [*gravely*] You're right. It can only be a matter of time.

EDWIN. What am I to do?

FRED. You ought to know—I don't want to dictate.

EDWIN. Never mind that—what's to be done?

FRED. [*briskly*] That depends. As regards Clive, it depends on which of you wins the scholarship. As regards Miss Durant, there is, of course, only one thing to do—tell her! [*He stands against the mantel-piece.*]

EDWIN. [*shakily*] Yes—of course—tell her——

FRED. Take my advice and make a clean breast of it to everybody. We are all a happy family here——

EDWIN. [*passionately*] That's just it! They are all decent fellows here—I wish to God they weren't. Then one wouldn't feel such an outsider. Oh, I see the whole proceeding! Confession—forgiveness, good-natured pity—I can't stand that [*widly.*] There will be no prayer-meetings—no repentant-sinner services held over me.

FRED. [*very quietly*] Is this manly pride or only fear at the thought of facing Margaret?

EDWIN. [*blusteringly*] Do you think I am a coward?

FRED. If you don't tell Miss Durant—Yes!

EDWIN. Who said I wasn't going to tell her?

FRED. Well, what do you mean to do?

EDWIN. [*helplessly*] Chance has taken the papers from me—let chance decide. [*Moves down left.*]

FRED. That is a coward's resort.

EDWIN. You are devilish candid. [*Turns swiftly.*]

FRED. You refused sympathy.

EDWIN. [*in self pity*] Well, I do think that after all I have gone through you might be a little more generous in your criticisms. You don't understand what it means when all that you have been working for, all that you have learnt to look forward to, depends on the goodwill of one person.

FRED. [*quietly*] And for fear of losing that you're going to keep this dark?

EDWIN. [*dully*] I'll tell Margaret.

FRED. [*firmly*] You must.

EDWIN. [*repeating*] I must.

FRED. At once!

EDWIN. At once!

Knock at the door.

EDWIN. [*steadyng himself*] Come in!

The door opens and the Porter announces "Lady to see you, sir." Enter Margaret. Exit Porter. Margaret is a tall, commanding girl, with clear-cut, striking features; a humorous twinkle in her eye tells of a keen sense of humour, and softens somewhat the determination of her chin. She is superbly self-

possessed, although frank and quite unaffected. Superficially gay and impulsive, we soon realize there is a deeper strain in her nature.

EDWIN. Margaret!

MARGARET. Edwin! [*They shake warmly*]

EDWIN. So you didn't forget?

MARGARET. Forget! Rubbish!

EDWIN. Well, Freddie was depraved enough to suggest the possibility. Oh! haven't you met? Let me introduce—Mr. Bellinger—Miss Durant. [*They shake.*]

FRED. [*ruefully examining his clothes*] I hope you will excuse my *négligé*, Miss Durant.

EDWIN. [*to Margaret*] Believe me, he is quite as disreputable as his appearance.

MARGARET. [*moving to fireplace*] Oh, I am sure he isn't anything of the sort. I've seen him at dances and theatres, and never once has he done anything he shouldn't.

FRED. [*dejected*] Never seen me do anything I shouldn't. Such is fame!

EDWIN. [*taking him aside*] For God's sake have a hunt for the synopsis—find it—destroy it—do anything to give me time!

FRED. Right—only mind you play the game.

Exit.

EDWIN. [*resolving to overcome his anxieties*] Do sit down, Margaret, and make yourself at home. The arm-chair is risky but comfortable—the others are safe but unattractive.

MARGARET. I'll brave the arm-chair. Now, before

we say another word—tell me—are there any results out yet?

EDWIN. None yet; but they are expected any minute—that is what I heard last.

MARGARET. [*enthusiastically*] Any minute! Perhaps while I'm here. What excitement. You can't imagine how anxious I am about them.

EDWIN. [*pleased*] Really!

MARGARET. Rather! You told me in your letter—that you thought you had—what you called—an “even money chance.” I was so pleased at that. What does it mean?

EDWIN. [*smiling*] It means that I have as much chance as all the rest put together.

MARGARET. Including Clive?

EDWIN. [*frowning*] Clive! You know Clive?

MARGARET. Oh, dear me, yes! I met him some months ago—didn't I tell you?

EDWIN. H'm!

MARGARET. [*gaily*] Don't begin to grow gloomy! Now, put the kettle on, or it will be dark; quick.

EDWIN. [*vaguely*] Kettle? Oh, yes—here it is. [*Takes kettle from table R.*] Now what else do we require?

MARGARET. Tea!

EDWIN. Tea—I will find some. [*Goes centre.*]

MARGARET. Milk!

EDWIN. I will borrow some.

MARGARET. Sugar!

EDWIN. I will deprive someone of his.

MARGARET. Tea-pot!

EDWIN. Tea-pot. Do you insist? We generally make it in the kettle—however——

MARGARET. What a hopeless person you are. Quick, now. [*Exit Edwin with kettle. Margaret wanders round the room and proceeds to examine his books. Enter Edwin, laden with tea-cups, etc., which he places on table R.*]

EDWIN. [*ruefully*] What a little bully you are. If I am to discharge our domestic affairs, I foresee chaos and catastrophe.

MARGARET. Any new poets?

EDWIN. I found a complete second-hand edition of Byron at a little shop. It is on that top shelf now.

MARGARET. Byron! Why Byron of all people?

EDWIN. Don't you like his writings?

MARGARET. [*gravely*] He was such a cad in real life.

Slight pause.

EDWIN. You take a very serious view of things.

MARGARET. [*smiling*] I am too young to do anything else.

Moves down centre.

EDWIN. That was a most unsentimental judgment of yours on Byron.

MARGARET. Of course. The world would be a terrible muddle if we judged people by sentiment and not by principle.

Pause.

EDWIN. [*suddenly*] Margaret!

MARGARET. Yes!

EDWIN. If you had to judge me, would it be according to sentiment or principle?

MARGARET. [*petulantly*] What a morbid Edwin it is to-day.

EDWIN. Who has been inspiring you with these dry principles?

MARGARET. Clive chiefly. [*Leaning on front of desk.*]

EDWIN. [*angrily*] Clive, Clive—always Clive.

MARGARET. And he always means every word he says; that is why I like him.

EDWIN. Oh, then you like him? [*Goes to her.*]

MARGARET. Don't you?

EDWIN. No!

MARGARET. Is it because you are rivals for the scholarship? I couldn't believe that would influence either of you.

EDWIN. It's not that.

MARGARET. Has he wronged you in any way?

EDWIN. It's nothing. [*He crosses down left.*]

MARGARET. I am sorry—I—[*changing the subject.*] Well, tell me what you've been doing lately.

EDWIN. Oh, the usual humdrum that seems inevitable.

MARGARET. What—no jollification after the exam.?

EDWIN. I only returned last night—yes—we had an impromptu supper then.

MARGARET. [*gaily*] What fun you men must have among yourselves. I should simply adore to be present at a supper; one hears such a lot about Bohemian life at college.

EDWIN. [*shrugging*] It's more babyish than Bohemian.

MARGARET. I'm very fond of babies.

EDWIN. [*amused*] Well—well, one of these fine nights I'll smuggle you behind that curtain, and then you can see for yourself. [*Goes to her, centre.*]

MARGARET. [*promptly*] That's a bargain!

EDWIN. [*taken aback*] What, you mean it? 'Pon my soul, you are worse than Lady Teazle.

MARGARET. [*moving down R.*] Oh, but Lady Teazle's concealment was a crime—mine would be a joke; and that is all the difference in the world. [*Turning.*] Why, I remember you said once that a joke justified anything.

EDWIN. [*vaguely*] Did I? [*Impulsively*] Margaret!

MARGARET. Yes——

EDWIN. You'll stand by me, won't you?

MARGARET. Edwin, anyone would think you had done something terrible.

EDWIN. [*harshly*] What if I had?

MARGARET. [*starting with horror*] Oh! [*reassuring herself.*] But then, you haven't; I know you too well. Do, do brighten up. Anyone would think it was the eve of your Waterloo, instead——

EDWIN. [*laughing*] Instead of the dawn of the future—the future! When we think of all that means to us, what a grand word! But to realise it we must get away from here, away from narrow ideas and crushing conventions—conventions that would judge a man by what he has *done*, and not by what he *is*. The future—just think of the delicious mystery, the dazzling promises it holds out to us.

MARGARET. Yes, yes—the future to us is everything.

EDWIN. And the past?

MARGARET. To us—nothing.

EDWIN. Absolutely nothing—[*excitedly*]. We'll snap our fingers at it—we'll give it the slip—and if we want to we'll just forget it—that's it, forget it. [*Knock at door—they separate. He calls "Come in." Enter Freddie.*]

FRED. [*seriously*] Would you excuse me, Miss Durant, if I had a private word with Edwin?

MARGARET. Certainly. [*She turns to the bookcase.*]

FRED. [*drawing Edwin aside down left—in an undertone*—Those papers——

EDWIN. Well?

FRED. Have been found.

EDWIN. Well?

FRED. Clive has them now.

EDWIN. [*clutching his arm*] The handwriting—identified—yet?

FRED. That I couldn't learn from the Porter.

EDWIN. Where is Clive now?

FRED. At the 'Varsity—waiting results.

EDWIN. Then it's only a question of time?

FRED. That's all.

In the distance is heard—"For he's a jolly good fellow" being sung in chorus. The voices grow louder.

EDWIN. What's that? [*Fred. runs to the door, opens it, and after looking outside shuts it hastily.*]

FRED. It is Sam and Charlie bringing provisions. If they come here it means you have won the scholarship.

EDWIN. Ah!

MARGARET. [*joyfully*] Oh, Edwin—how grand! All our dreams will come true.

FRED. [*excitedly*] If they mean to celebrate you—what shall I do?

EDWIN. Put them off. Quick.

MARGARET. Not on account of me, please.

FRED. But half the college may troop in—it's impossible.

EDWIN. [*wildly*] Put them off—put them off.

MARGARET. Nonsense, I won't spoil sport. I'll slip behind the curtains—and I can hear the fun. [*Darts up to curtain.*] All our wishes are coming true.

EDWIN. Send them away—tell them some other time.

Fred makes a gesture to stop her.

MARGARET. It is only a joke.

EDWIN. [*beside himself*] Freddie, what shall I do? What shall I say? For God's sake——

FRED. [*shouting*] Keep your head!

The door is burst open and Sam and Charlie stand on the threshold, singing the last lines of "For he's a jolly good fellow," Sam carries a large glass demijohn of beer, while Charlie shamefacedly tries to hide a paper parcel under his arm. When the song is over, they advance and clasp Edwin by the hands.

SAM. C-Congrats on the S-Scholarship.

CHARLIE. Congrats old man—you came first—Clive second, and the rest nowhere—aren't you satisfied?

He and Sam place the demijohn and parcel on the desk.

EDWIN. Quite.

SAM. We t-thought we w-would have a quiet little c-celebration amongst o-ourselves.

CHARLIE. Very quiet—very quiet and reasonable—everything in moderation.

SAM. [*advancing threateningly to Fred.*] If you j-join in the fun, you pay your s-share.

FRED. [*laughing*] Alright, Shylock. [*He moves to the table. Sam scratches his head, then goes to the bookcase and takes down a volume.*]

EDWIN. I insist on sharing also.

CHARLIE. Nonsense—this is our token of appreciation.

EDWIN. [*with an effort*] As you will, gentlemen—now, let me arrange you comfortably. [*He clears ink-well, papers and pens from the desk and places them on table R. He takes three silver cups and a tumbler from the mantelpiece and places them on the desk.*] You should have brought your own mugs and chairs. However, that's for Charlie—the largest one for Fred., being the most experienced—the tumbler for myself. Hie, Sam, what are you doing there?

SAM. [*solemnly*] I am t-trying to f-find who that c-chap Shylock was.

FRED. Ignorance is bliss—come and drown the insult.

They sit—Edwin at the head of the desk, facing the audience, Fred. on his right, Sam and Charlie on his left. Edwin's manner is one of restless anxiety with outbursts of forced bravado.

FRED. [*pointing to the parcel*] What mystery is there?

Charlie undoes the string and reveals a large lobster. They gather round, then step back holding their heads high. Sam gets under the table, Fred. leaps to fireplace and seizes the tongs.

FRED. Ahem! could you inform me what it is?

CHARLIE. [*ruefully*] Well, we bought it under the impression that it was a lobster.

FRED. First impressions are deceptive. [*Dramatically*] Remove yon bauble. [*Approaches Charlie with head averted, and hands him the tongs.*]

SAM. D-down it.

FRED. Don't waste such an expensive odour—Charlie, insert the repulsive monster beneath the couch of our neighbour. 'Twill cause him curiosity in the small hours of the morning.

SAM. B-bravo. [*Exit Charlie with lobster.*]

FRED. Now for the convivial spirit. [*Grasps demi-john and pours out beer.*] Edwin, pass your glass—Sam, yours—give me Charlie's, quick, we'll make the old boy drink it and ruin his career in the Church. [*Poetically.*] What music can compare to the friendly gurgle of beer. [*Enter Charlie.*]

SAM. Now, C-Charlie, do your d-duty.

CHARLIE. [*clearing his throat and rising pompously*] H'm. Ladies and Gentlemen——

FRED. I refuse to be insulted.

CHARLIE. If you were to ask me—unaccustomed as I am—I should venture to suggest—of course it is only my opinion—that this is a most—er—er——

SAM. [*prompting*] Auspicious——

CHARLIE. Ahem! auspicious occasion. For in it—on it—I should say, around it, our excellent friend, Edwin, has achieved fame for himself, and for the college. It is unnecessary for me to dilate——

SAM. Hear, H-Hear!

CHARLIE. Upon the qualities of the—the——

FRED. The said Edwin.

CHARLIE. He has played tennis and cricket for the college, and above all he has always played the game.

SAM. B-Bravo!

CHARLIE. Let us drink congratulations on our friend's past and success to his future. Gentlemen, Edwin!

Fred., Sam, and Charlie raise their cups to drink. Charlie sees the beer in his and hesitates.

CHARLIE. Would you mind if I had a drop of water?

FRED. Certainly; it would be an insult to Edwin!

EDWIN. Drink, man.

CHARLIE. Ah, you young fellows—well, just this once—Edwin!

SAM. } Edwin! [*They drink.*]
FRED. }

Sam and Fred. take a mouthful and then sit again. Charlie, however, continues to drain his at one draught; the others watch him in profound admiration. He finishes and sinks down with a long sigh of contentment.

SAM. [*to Charlie*] You'll be w-wasted in the C-Church!

FRED. Far from it; in fact, judging by the rotundity of certain well-known bishops, I prophesy that his capacity for emptying pint pots will be much in demand.

CHARLIE. Ah, Fred., my boy—a joke's a joke—but everything in moderation.

FRED. Even beer, eh?

CHARLIE. Come, now—drop jesting and second my toast—give a speech.

FRED. Make a speech! Do I ever do anything else?

CHARLIE. A special effort.

FRED. [*indignantly*] Effort, effort, indeed; allow me to state in self-defence that I am quite incapable of such a thing; but speech-making is not effort—except for the listeners—so just to keep the kettle boiling——

EDWIN. Great Scott!—that reminds me. I put my kettle on about ten minutes ago; the water has probably boiled away——

CHARLIE. And the pantry is probably on fire——

SAM. H-Hell!

FRED. [*leaping up in mock heroism*] Keep your seats, gentlemen; there is no need for panic. My life is worthless; let me face the flames. I bequeath to Edwin, my money; to Sam, my manners; to you, Charlie, my morals. In a word, nothing to all. Farewell. [*Exit melodramatically.*]

SAM. L-Lunatic!

EDWIN. [*to Charlie, nervously*] Charlie, when you went outside with the lobster, did you—er—notice anybody?

CHARLIE. Not a soul! I think everyone is over at the 'Varsity—back any minute, of course!

Edwin, after an apprehensive glance at the curtains, walks nervously to the fireplace.

FRED. [*bursting in*] Drink for the dying here!

CHARLIE. I believe the whole episode was a clever excuse for a drink.

FRED. [*proudly*] Sir, do you imagine I would stoop to find excuse for a drink.

EDWIN. Fred., were there any of our fellows in the corridor?

FRED. I heard some of them in the quadrangle.

EDWIN. Ah!

CHARLIE. Now, Fred., don't try to elude a speech.

FRED. [*rising*] Fellow workmen—I might as well warn you that I regard speech-making as formal egoism, as a public opportunity for airing one's private views about oneself. [*Very politely.*] Would you excuse my asking you—not that I am in the least curious—whether I have passed my term exam.?

CHARLIE. Yes, you have! I thought you knew.

SAM. C-Congrats.

EDWIN. Congrats.

FRED. [*sadly*] What a pity. It'll be such a shock to the pater. In fact, when he realizes that instead of being a steady, industrious failure, I am merely a genius, he will be bitterly disappointed. However, if I pass my final I shall leave the 'Varsity with the comforting reflection that I have never left undone a single thing that I ought not to have done, or resisted even the mildest of temptations. But stay—on one point my conscience pricks, and that is that I am

leaving the 'Varsity of my own freewill, and not at the request of the authorities. Gentlemen, I have always regarded rustication as the hall-mark of genius, and yet I have never achieved it. Still, in justice to myself, I add that I have done my best—for I have been conspicuously intoxicated at all public functions—I have wrecked the college on the smallest provocation—and I have violated every rule and smashed every window in the place at least four times [*with a gesture*]*—*and yet here I am, the sad picture of vice unrewarded; unless it is its own reward. Gentlemen, my toast is, "The jolly times w've had together." Oh! I could a tale unfold that would make the hair of clotting parents rise—but I won't. Still, before ceasing, I should like to linger a moment over the past—and in our cases, what can be more pleasant? [*Edwin bites his lip.*] I shall never forget how after the last boat-race dinner——

CHARLIE. [*warningly*] Fred.—Fred., you are getting on to hazardous topics——

FRED. [*unheeding*] I shall never forget how I came into serious conflict with the law, and how Edwin warded off from me the aggressiveness of five policemen. In fact, the grave and fluent courtesy with which he cajoled those limbs of the law was a lesson in Undergraduate deportment, while on my twenty-first birthday——

CHARLIE. [*wagging his forefinger*] No, Fred., you know very well that you don't remember anything about your twenty-first birthday.

FRED. [*proudly*] Sir, I distinctly recollect having breakfast——

EDWIN. Fred., I forbid you to become reminiscent ; your past is too murky.

FRED. [*flattered*] You think so, eh? Well, I suppose you're right. I conclude with my very latest story——

CHARLIE. [*remonstrating*] Fred.—please—please—

EDWIN. No, Fred., none of your jokes. [*Points surreptitiously to the curtain.*]

SAM. Why this s-sudden p-piety?

EDWIN. You must remember, Sam, that we are no longer Undergrads, and must respect the dignity of our professions.

FRED. Pass the beer!

SAM. [*rising and toasting*] The Dignity of our P-Professions.

FRED. [*rising*] The Law!

EDWIN. [*rising*] Medicine!

CHARLIE. The Church!

SAM. Building B-Bridges!

ALL. "The Dignity of our Professions." [*They drink and then sit again.*]

SAM. [*rising*] I'll sing y-you a s-song.

FRED. [*murderously*] If you dare to sing there will be blood-shed. Your conversation is depressing enough without——

SAM. [*commencing with solemn determination*] I'll s-sing thee s-songs of A-Araby.

FRED. Not if I know it. [*He seizes a mug.*]

CHARLIE. [*soothingly*] Gentlemen, gentlemen; what would your parents say? Sam, don't be aggressive. Fred., don't be pugnacious. [*They subside.*] Remember that we haven't heard Edwin's speech yet.

SAM. Edwin!

CHARLIE. Edwin!

FRED. Edwin!

EDWIN. [*at the head of the desk*] Gentlemen, I must thank you for all this—this honour. It is only right that we should celebrate this event across the desk at which I have fagged for five toilsome years. My friend on the right has toasted the jolly times we've had in the past. My toast is the jolly times we are going to have. For us there is no such word as *past*. But there is another word to which I ask you to drink—a word that tingles with romance——

ALL. Hooray!

EDWIN. A word that makes imagination leap——

ALL. Bravo!

EDWIN. A word that sets the world to music—Gentlemen, "The Future."

ALL. The Future. [*They rise and clink cups.*]

Loud knock at door. They pause in the act of drinking and exchange questioning glances. Edwin stares before him—he steadies himself to call "Come in."

Enter Clive.

CHARLIE. [*cheerfully*] Why, it's Clive!

EDWIN. [*in a whisper*] Clive! [*He turns slowly to meet his visitor.*]

CLIVE. [*quite frankly*] Edwin! Shake! Congratulations! I called in a moment ago but you were out. I wanted to smooth over any little differences there may have been between us; to put an end to any coldness—you understand. As you won the Scholarship,

I feel I ought to make the first advances—Shake!
[*Edwin shakes hands like one dazed.*]

CHARLIE. That's right—that's right! How I hate unpleasantness.

FRED. Have you recognized that handwriting, Clive?

CLIVE. No, no—and I don't want to—I am tired of the ugly business—besides, why worry over the irretrievable. Good luck, Edwin! [*He drinks and moves to fireplace.*]

EDWIN. [*rattling along jerkily*] Yes—why worry over the irretrievable. Forget it. forget it, that is my motto.

SAM. [*rising and unrolling a sheet of paper*] H'm. Gentlemen, now that we are all g-gathered——

FRED. Shut up, Sunbeam!

SAM. [*imperturbable*] After this r-rude interruption I p-proceed again. Gentlemen, I wish to remind you of the "Liberty of the S-Soul Bill" or the "Anti-Chapel A-Act," which will abolish c-c-compulsory C-Chapels.

CLIVE. So that we can follow our own ideas. Excellent scheme!

FRED. [*blase*] It will also enable us to sleep in late on Sundays, which is a still better scheme.

CHARLIE. [*bristling*] You fellows are jesting with a very serious subject.

SAM. B-Bosh. Now if the winner of the S-Scholarship signs first, his n-name will carry weight. That is my g-great idea. Sign, Edwin, and briefly state your reasons!

Edwin takes the paper and moves to table R. for a pen.

SAM. You're n-next please, C-Clive! [*Clive moves to table R., and stands waiting at Edwin's elbow. Edwin sees him watching and pauses in the act of signing.*]

SAM. [*calling to Edwin*] Hurry up; it's not a d-death w-warrant. [*Edwin laughs and scrawls down his name; the three men at the desk chatter in subdued tones. Clive then picks up the paper, examines Edwin's signature, starts up and frowns. With an expression half wonder, half horror, he turns on Edwin. They exchange a long meaning glance, a burst of laughter rises from the three at the desk. Clive signs, while Edwin goes to the bookcase and fumbles with a magazine.*]

CHARLIE. [*to Fred.*] Ah, Fred., I believe that in spite of your flighty habits you will turn out a useful citizen.

FRED. [*pettishly*] I don't want to be useful. I want to be ornamental.

CHARLIE. You will probably marry a—a——

FRED. Chorus girl?

CHARLIE. No; a sensible girl.

FRED. What a punishment!

CHARLIE. And then become the father of a flourishing family.

FRED. I don't object to the flourishing family, but I draw the line at marrying. [*Sees the curtain and stops his mouth with his hand.*]

SAM. [*squashingly*] V-vulgar with out being f-funny.

FRED. [*heatedly*] Well, you're neither!

CHARLIE. Tut—tut. Now, let's finish up with a chorus—all together—"I've got a Motto." [*All, except Edwin and Clive, sing—the song after a few lines dies away.*]

CHARLIE. Oh, I say, you fellows—join in—Edwin! Clive! If you had won the Scholarship like Edwin, would you behave like him?

CLIVE. [*grimly*] I couldn't say—very probably.

EDWIN. [*violently*] You'll drive me mad with your crazy ideas of merriment.

CHARLIE. [*pleading*] But, Edwin, just to finish——

EDWIN. It is finished; consider the fun as all over.

SAM. B-but the b-beer?

EDWIN. Take it with you—only go—let me alone!

He waves them away wildly.

FRED. Come along, boys, we'll polish it off in Sam's boudoir—in an Engineer's room there is always comfort, if not culture.

Sam, Fred. and Charlie troop out with the beer. Fred., however, pauses on the threshold, takes in the situation with a glance, and quietly shuts the door. Margaret is still behind the curtains. Pause. Edwin and Clive face one another.

EDWIN. I'm damned sorry.

CLIVE [*always in a measured incisive voice*] We'll wipe that sort of thing off the slate and get to business—NOW——

EDWIN. [*anxiously*] Any other time, any other place—but not now and here.

CLIVE. This seems as private as anywhere.

EDWIN. But it isn't.

CLIVE. Oh, who is to hear us?

EDWIN. [*limply*] Yes, I suppose it is private.

CLIVE. Good, now we can thrash the matter out. May I ask why?

EDWIN. [*trying to stop him*] It's a personal favour.

CLIVE. [*inflexible*] Why did you steal my synopsis?

EDWIN. Ah! [*He glances at the curtain in despair. Then almost defiantly.*] How do you know I did steal it?

CLIVE. I recognized your signature just now—it was similar to the writing on the synopsis; besides, if you didn't take it, why did you so suddenly tell me you were sorry?

EDWIN. [*giving in*] But I *am* sorry!

CLIVE. Cut sentiment. Why did you take them?

EDWIN. [*bitterly*] Why not say "steal?"

CLIVE. It was a concession to your feelings.

EDWIN. Cut sentiment!

CLIVE. [*flushing*] Why quibble and why be unpleasant? You haven't answered my question yet.

EDWIN. Do you think a man has a cut and dried reason for everything he does? I took—[*quickly and proudly correcting himself*—stole it, because I couldn't help it.

CLIVE. Couldn't help what?

EDWIN. [*flaring up*] I tell you I am not going to be dissected and diagnosed.

CLIVE. [*coolly*] Why not be friendly and reasonable?

EDWIN. [*wearily*] Well, the thing is done now—the why and the wherefore is immaterial. I shall, of course, return the Scholarship to you.

CLIVE. And then?

EDWIN. Oh, then I'll go away.

CLIVE. No, keep the Scholarship, you value it—I don't—you need it—I don't. Very well, keep it; after all, it will help you to make a beginning that will in the end atone for the way you won it.

EDWIN. [*thoughtfully*] Sort of good out of evil scheme, eh?

CLIVE. Precisely.

EDWIN. There's romance in that idea!

CLIVE. [*sternly*] There's commonsense!

EDWIN. Perhaps it is not impossible for them to blend.

CLIVE. No more so than for us to agree—and we have agreed. The matter is settled.

EDWIN. [*eagerly*] Then the past is done away with.

CLIVE. Forgotten, as though it had never been.

EDWIN. [*joyfully*] And my future remains untouched?

CLIVE. On one condition.

EDWIN. [*crushed*] Condition!

CLIVE. You said you were going away as soon as possible.

EDWIN. Yes.

CLIVE. H'm. Are you going alone?

EDWIN. What do you mean?

CLIVE. Come, I am a fool to beat about the bush. Are you and Margaret engaged?

EDWIN. We are to be—but now—I hardly know——

CLIVE. I understand. You mean that when she learns the truth about the Scholarship her opinion may change.

EDWIN. [*heatedly*] What right have you to probe my private affairs?

CLIVE. Just this—I love Margaret!

Pause.

EDWIN. Well?

CLIVE. [*abruptly*] Have you told Margaret yet how you won the Scholarship?

EDWIN. Not yet.

CLIVE. Does she know about it? [*The curtains move slightly.*]

EDWIN. O—I—I don't think so.

CLIVE. Is there anyone else, besides us two, who knows?

EDWIN. Only Freddie; he's true as steel.

CLIVE. Then under these circumstances she can't know yet.

EDWIN. [*hesitatingly*] I suppose not—n-no.

CLIVE. H'm. When do you intend to tell her?

EDWIN. [*rising*] That is my business.

CLIVE. Pardon me, it is more essentially mine.

EDWIN. [*contemptuously*] You talk as though you were bargaining for her across a counter.

CLIVE. [*unruffled*] We can dismiss niceties of language. Are you, or are you not, going to clear the way for me, and play the game by both of us?

EDWIN. I shall—I assure you that Margaret shall learn everything.

CLIVE. [*inexorable*] Sit down and write to her now!

EDWIN. Surely you can trust me?

CLIVE. Do you trust yourself?

EDWIN. If I refuse to write? What then?

CLIVE. What then! Well, I shall simply call the whole college into this room and tell them the truth about the Scholarship. In an hour it will spread through the 'Varsity, and Margaret will hear the tale under the most unfavourable circumstances.

EDWIN. [*hotly*] That's a gentlemanly thing to do—

CLIVE. It matters very little to me whether my acts are what the world calls gentlemanly or not, I am not going to have my future spoilt by your indecision or my own sentiment. I merely stipulate that you shall play the game both by her and me.

EDWIN. [*disdainfully*] You're playing the game all right.

CLIVE. I am. Wouldn't you? [*Firmly.*] Will—you—sit—down—and—write—that letter?

EDWIN. [*clenching his hands*] I refuse to be brow-beaten and bullied simply because I have made one slip.

CLIVE. [*raising his voice*] Then I shall call in the college—I hate myself for doing it—it makes me feel a brute; but if I don't, I shall be a weakling; so I give you a last chance; for by Heaven, I shall stick to my word!

EDWIN. [*in a rage*] And so shall I! [*Crosses right.*]

CLIVE. I'm fighting for my future!

EDWIN. So am I.

Clive moves resolutely to the door. Margaret draws the curtain and steps into the room. Edwin starts. Clive follows his eyes and turns.

CLIVE. [*aghast*] Margaret!

MARGARET. [*cold and self-possessed*] Do you still persist?

CLIVE. You—you heard everything?

MARGARET. Unavoidably.

CLIVE. Then the letter need not be written. [*To Edwin.*] But you knew all the time that she was listening, and played a stubborn part so as to put me in an unfavourable light—as Margaret heard us, what possible difference could the letter make?

EDWIN. [*stubbornly*] I wasn't going to give in whilst—[*he checks himself.*]

CLIVE. [*to Margaret*] You understand my action?

MARGARET. I understand you—both!

CLIVE. Then we can still be friends?

MARGARET. I'm still friends with—both. [*Clive turns away. Margaret looks at Edwin. Pause.*] Friends and nothing more.

Silence.

She turns quickly and is gone. Edwin and Clive avoid one another's eyes, then Clive goes to the door; with his hand on the knob he pauses and turns, their eyes meet. Clive leaves hurriedly. Edwin shuts the door after him, and passes his hand savagely across his brow, as though dispelling an ugly dream. His eyes light on his half-finished glass standing on the desk where he left it. He raises it, toasting questioningly—"The Future." Then almost inaudibly, "The Future." His hand, holding the glass, sinks slowly to the desk. He stares before him.

CURTAIN.

W. C. Penfold & Co. Ltd., Printers, Sydney.



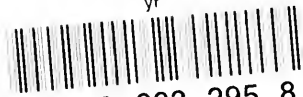
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA LIBRARY

Los Angeles

This book is DUE on the last date stamped below.

PR9619.3 .S8281

yr



L 009 603 295 8

UC SOUTHERN REGIONAL LIBRARY FACILITY



AA

001 421 396

1

